KILLING IS HARMLESS

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KILLING IS HARMLESS

A CRITICAL READING OF *SPEC OPS: THE LINE*

By Brendan Keogh

At night you can see the lights sometimes from a passing tanker or trawler. From up on the cliffs they are mundane, but down here they fugue into ambiguity. For instance, I cannot readily tell if they belong above or below the waves. The distinction now seems mundane; why not everything all at once! There's nothing better to do here than indulge in contradictions, whilst waiting for the fabric of life to unravel.

—Dear Esther, *The Chinese Room*

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Writing what turned out to be a short book about a single videogame was a much more stressful and intense task than I anticipated—and I anticipated it would be pretty stressful and intense! There are a few people who, without their support, this project never would have seen the light of day.

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—Brendan Keogh

FOREWORD

"The second wave of Western filmmakers (Sergio Leone, Sam Peckinpah, Clint Eastwood) turned our deep familiarity with the genre in on itself, addressing existential questions and examining the nature of violence. These films were radical departures from the Hollywood formula, not because they rejected the familiar settings or the guns or the hero/villain dichotomy, but because they made these the very subjects of their scrutiny."

—*Michael Abbott,* The Brainy Gamer.

"We shouldn't be afraid to question our own medium. It is ours to do with as we see fit. There is no problem in questioning what is your own and asking what it is that you want to do with it, and are we necessarily doing the right thing with it? I mean, that's the other great thing about mediums, is that there is no right thing."

—*Walt Williams, lead writer for* Spec Ops: The Line.

In his article "High Noon For Shooters," videogame critic Michael Abbott notes that as the Western film genre matured, it turned its gaze inwards onto the Western genre itself to ask questions about the ways it depicted violence. This second wave of Western filmmakers were not necessarily trying to determine if what Western films did was 'good' or 'bad', but they simply wanted to create films that poked at the genre, interrogated it, unsettled it.

Abbott's point is that the bulging bubble that is videogame's shooter genre is heading towards a similar introspective turn. Only so many games can be absolutely uncritical and unthinking in their violence before players start to think more critically about what these games are asking of them and developers start to question just what they are creating. After so many years of shooters that don't think twice about the excessive violences they ask their

players to participate in, the shooter genre is set for a 'second wave' of games that, much like the Western film genre, turn the gaze back onto themselves. These shooters won't necessarily be trying to determine if shooters are 'good' or 'bad', but will simply want to create shooters that poke at the genre, interrogate it, unsettle it.

Of course, critics have been critiquing shooters for years. Even those of us that sincerely enjoy shooters can't shake the feeling that there is something fundamentally unsettling about them. Even though most of the articles I write about shooters are praising positive things about them, I always feel obliged to add caveats. The *Modern Warfare* trilogy is an absolutely magnificent example of how to tell a scripted story in a videogame—even if that story makes absolutely no sense and the trilogy completely alienates and vilifies the stereotypical Russian and Arabic enemies in really problematic ways. The *Gears of War* games are a terrific example of how to convey a game's tone through its core mechanics, with its seminal cover system evoking the intensity and claustrophobia of an utterly futile war—even as the games laughably ask us to weep for a character's dead wife moments after he trash-talked an enemy while stomping on his brains. *Far Cry 2*'s open vistas and persistently uncontrollable skirmishes give an intensity to its violence matched by few games—even as it chooses to depict a nation without civilians, a conflict without collateral.

There's no shortage of shooters that want to be about *something*. But very few shooters are brave enough to look in the mirror—or to force the player that enjoys shooters to look in the mirror—and question what they see. Not to pass judgment. Not to ask them to change their ways. Just to understand what is going on here. To appropriate Abbott's post, it is high noon for shooters to take a long, hard look at themselves.

Clearly, Abbott is onto something with his prediction. Not two months after he wrote his article, Yager and 2K released *Spec Ops: The Line* and made me question everything I've ever thought about shooters.

SPEC OPS: THE LINE

The Line is a shooter about shooters. It makes some interesting commentaries on modern warfare and Western interventionism to be sure, but what I got out of it most were questions about the shooter genre itself—

the questions that other shooters either willfully ignore or simply don't think to ask. Is it really okay to be shooting this many people? Does it actually matter that they aren't real? What does it say about us, the people who play shooter after shooter, the people who have a virtual murder count in the thousands of thousands, that these are the games we enjoy playing? What does it say about us, as a culture, that these are the kinds of games that make so much money?

The Line isn't interested in answering these questions; it is interested in asking them. Or, rather, it is interested in having its players ask themselves these questions. Just like the many times that Walker is forced to look at his reflection throughout the game, *The Line* forces the player to look at their own reflection in the television set. It turns its focus outwards to not ask questions about shooters as they are designed but as they are *consumed*.

In *The Line*, the city of Dubai has been destroyed by the worst sandstorms ever seen by humankind. Before the storms intensified, US Army Colonel John Konrad volunteered his entire battalion—the 33rd—to aid in the evacuation of Dubai's citizens. When ordered to leave the city as the storms intensified, Konrad disobeyed and stayed in Dubai. His men followed him, and the entire 33rd effectively defected from the US Army to assist the people of Dubai.

Presumed dead after no contact is made for six months, a distress signal from Konrad is intercepted, and a squad is sent in to Dubai's ruins to look for survivors. This squad is Delta Squad, lead by the playable character, Captain Martin Walker, and also consisting of Lieutenant Adams and Sergeant Lugo.

As Delta venture deeper and deeper into Dubai, they make difficult decisions that they then have to live with. These decisions change them. They force the three men to look at their own actions in a new light and to question everything their own identities are based on.

As the game progresses, Walker loses track of Delta's original orders to just make contact with survivors, instead becoming obsessed with finding Konrad. What follows over the course of the game is a slow and uncertain descent into madness—or, at least, that is how most want to categorise it. For me, I don't think 'madness' is the right word. What follows, for me, is a slow and uncertain descent into *darkness*. As Captain Walker leads his men into Dubai and struggles to deal with the violence he is 'forced' to commit, he doesn't so much go mad as come to terms with who (and what) he truly is.

Reality itself begins to unravel as the game progresses, and the game ultimately refuses to offer the player any clear answers as to what is 'real' and what is imagined by Walker. As I said above, *The Line* isn't interested in finding answers. Only in asking questions.

Much has been made by both critics and the developers themselves to *The Line*'s allusions to the film *Apocalypse Now* and the book *Heart of Darkness*. Colonel John Konrad is a clear hybrid of *Heart of Darkness*'s author Joseph Conrad and the character Kurtz. The fact he is a colonel also makes a nod to Colonel Walter Kurtz (the renegade figure of *Apocalypse Now* who is himself obviously inspired by the Kurtz character of Conrad's novel). It is misguided to say that *The Line* is 'based on' these previous works, but the questions it demands of its players are indeed influenced heavily by the questions *Apocalypse Now* asks its viewers and *Heart of Darkness* asks its readers. Like both of these, *The Line* is not looking for easy answers but wants to expose complex dualities.

Critic Tom Bissell, in his fabulous *Grantland* essay, notes that *The Line* is about Nathan Drake going insane. By this, Bissell is alluding to the voice actor that *Uncharted*'s Nathan Drake, *The Line*'s Captain Walker, and countless other videogame characters share in Nolan North. Bissell is suggesting that *The Line* is about watching the playable everyman character go insane. I would alter this slightly, however: *The Line* isn't about Nathan Drake going insane; it is about how Nathan Drake was *always* insane to begin with.

By contrast, Walker may be the sanest character we have ever occupied in a shooter. The violence he causes actually affects him. He spends the entire game in denial, to be sure, but the acts themselves get beneath his skin and his consciousness to affect him on a fundamental level. What makes *The Line* so fascinatingly unique is the slow, gradual development of its characters. As Walker is forced to commit increasingly terrible acts, who he is changes. What he looks like changes. What he sounds like changes. Perhaps what is most disturbing about Walker is that the more damaged he becomes, the more like a *normal* playable character he appears. If Walker goes insane over the course of *The Line*, Nathan Drake and the many other playable characters that came before must have been insane long before we joined with them.

This is, for me, how *The Line* delivers its critique of shooters. We often joke that Nathan Drake, Niko Bellic, Marcus Fenix, Sam Fisher must be sociopaths to do what they do in their respective games. *The Line* suggests

our characters are sociopaths *because* of what they do in their games, and then it draws attention to just who it is that is making these sociopaths do these things that they do: the player. Suddenly joking about sociopathic characters isn't so funny when we are indicted along with them.

Towards the end of this project, in the conclusion, I call *The Line* a "post-*Bioshock*" game. I typed that weird, pseudo-academic, and somewhat pretentious neologism and then just stopped and looked at it, trying to figure out what I meant by it. *Bioshock*, through its "would you kindly" reveal, made a statement about videogame play. It noted how, as a player, I have never made a choice in a videogame. It noted that every time I thought I was making a choice of my own free will, I was, in fact, just doing what the game permitted me to do. This is as true for *Sim City* and *Minecraft* as it is for *Final Fantasy VII* and *Dear Esther*.

Post *Bioshock*, then, I think there has been an absolving of the player's responsibility in gameplay alongside, paradoxically, a determination to hang on to the player's agency. That is, players still demand the ability to make 'choices' but refuse to accept responsibility for those choices. We are happy to assume that the responsibility for what happens in a game lies with the developer—it is Naughty Dog's fault that Nathan Drake is a sociopathic killer, not mine. I was just playing the game. I can't be held responsible for my actions. I had no choice.[1]

The Line, I think, reacts against this. It agrees with *Bioshock* that the player, for as long as they choose to play the game, doesn't really make any choices that the game has not already made for them. However, unlike *Bioshock*, it insists the player is still responsible for these actions *because* of the one choice the player did make: to play the game in the first place. If we laugh at the way Nathan Drake is a sociopathic killer, what does it say about us that we are still happy to share his company for three games and dozens of hours?

Critics Matthew Burns and Sparky Clarkson have written excellent essays that, on the contrary, don't see *The Line* exposing the player's responsibility so much as retreating from the developer's responsibility. These are perhaps fair criticisms, and I think developers and publishers are, without a doubt, responsible for the kind of games that get produced. Yet, I don't think that negates what *The Line* says so powerfully: we as players are responsible for what we play.

1. Anjin Anhut has written a far more comprehensive comparative piece about *Bioshock* and *The Line* at http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=7453

There is a loading screen tip towards the end of the game, when Walker's cognitive dissonance is nearing its most extreme: "To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless."

To kill for entertainment is harmless.

These loading screen messages, as we will see later on, are kind of Walker's subconscious. Some of them question his actions. Others, like this one, seem to cement Walker's denial of what his actions are doing. It is what he tells himself in order to justify what he does. So often we justify playing shooters with "It's not real" or "It's just a bit of fun". Or, for me as a critic, I justify my interest in them as "Well, I know they are problematic, but I still enjoy them. I would rather understand that enjoyment that dismiss them outright."

The real trick of this loading screen message is that it doesn't specify 'virtual killing' as harmless, but "killing for entertainment" as harmless. It is still labeled as killing. The statement seems to imply that when we play shooters, we are, on some kind of metaphysical level, still killing. At first this seems ridiculous. Of course we aren't 'actually' killing when we kill in a videogame. But after playing *The* Line, I'm no longer sure the answer is that simple. On some level of my brain, when I choose to pull my controller's right trigger while the crosshair is aimed at a group of polygons made to look like a man, am I not choosing to kill someone?

This is the beauty (the ugly, ugly beauty) of *The Line*. It doesn't pass a value judgment on shooters. It doesn't just try to tell us that shooters are 'good' or 'bad'. Such a message would be hypocritical as, by all accounts, *The Line is* a shooter. It does not attempt to offer an alternative to the shooter, nor does it suggest that we even need an alternative. Instead, *The Line* shows that neither 'good' nor 'bad' are adequate labels for the complex, contradictory position in culture that the modern shooter holds. Instead it ask us to simply think about shooters with a bit more nuance, about what it is we are actually doing in these games, about what is going on in our minds while we play them, and why we are playing them in the first place. That's all. Just think. *The Line* isn't interested in offering answers, only questions.

A METHODOLOGY, OF SORTS.

So what is this ridiculously long thing that you have just started reading? As a freelance critic, *The Line* is, at first glance, exactly the game I rely on to make

my pitches to editors: it is a game about *something*. It should have been easy for me to take a part of it and write a thousand words or two about what it 'means'.

But almost immediately I came across a problem: I want to say more about *The Line* than I could fit into one or even several essays. When I tried to write shorter pieces about *The Line,* I realised it was practically impossible to take any one segment or scene of the game and write about it in a vacuum, separate from the rest of the game. Because of how the game works with the way its characters and themes slowly evolve over the course of the entire game, no one chunk of the game can accurately depict what the game is about. Instead, the entire arc, from start to finish, has to be examined.

I don't just want to talk about broad themes. I don't just want to try to answer the questions the game forced me to ask myself. Instead, I want to understand how the game was able to make me ask these questions in the first place. To do this I need to talk about specific moments that can't be easily separated from the context of all the other moments around them. So many themes emerge gradually over the course of the game (such as the progression/regression of the characters) that a critical reading of the game in its entirety is the only way I can think to truly critically appreciate *The Line*.

So that is what this is an attempt to do. Across the following chapters I will perform a "close, critical reading" of *The Line*. Over the following chapters I will talk through an entire playing of the game, from the moment I click on 'New Game' to the end of the epilogue. I will point out scenes, objects, sounds, and dialogue snippets, and I will discuss how I interpreted all of these. I will build up from these moments to see just how *The Line* asked the questions it asked. Or, more accurately, how it managed to motivate me into asking the questions I asked myself.

Ultimately, this is an act of interpretation. Like any reading of any text, it is necessarily a selective reading. The meanings I get out of it are unlikely to be precisely the same as those that you get out of it, or precisely the same as those that the developers intended to put into it. I'm not trying to claim that I know, objectively, exactly what *The Line* is 'about'. I am simply trying to understand my own experience with this game.

It's my hope that those readers who got *something* out of the game but can't quite describe what that something is will read this and find the words they need. I also hope that those readers who played the game and found it to be no more interesting than any other shooter can read this and see what

others took away from the game. And, finally, I hope people who never plan to play the game themselves will be able to read this and get an idea of what the game is doing.

That said, it isn't my intention to spend 50,000 words trying to convince you that *The Line* is a great game. I think it is a *significant* game, and that is why I am writing this. However, I will try my best to acknowledge other people's criticisms and perspective. Similarly, it is also worth noting that many people will play the game as a generic third-person shooter and take away little more than that. I returned multiple times to a YouTube video series that plays through the entire game to check my references. The player that produced these videos spent much of the time trash-talking the NPCs and reveling in the violence with hardly a moment's reflection. As he gunned down civilians towards the end of the game he shouted, "Die you faggots!" over his mic.

But I don't think that other players getting nothing positive (or nothing at all) out of *The Line* negates the richly meaningful experience that many others and myself have taken away from this game. So what follows is not a defense of *The Line* nor is it a praise of *The Line*. It is simply a reading. It is an attempt to pick apart this game from start to end to try to understand just how I was so powerfully affected by it. For me, *The Line* made me question just what my responsibility is as a player of military shooters, and the following chapters are an exploration of *how* it made me ask those questions.

So as Walker leads Lugo and Adams in Konrad's footsteps into the unknowns of post-storm Dubai, so I'm leading you, my reader, into the unknowns of a kind of videogame criticism I have never attempted before. I learned as much about my experiences with this game in writing the words on the following pages as I did in the three plays of the game that preceded it. I hope that you, too, will find something that may enlighten your own experiences of the game. So let's enter the storm and see what we learn about shooters, and what we learn about ourselves.

Welcome to Dubai.

PROLOGUE

If a picture says a thousand words, I could probably spend twice that talking about *The Line*'s menu screen. In the foreground, a shredded, battered American flag flaps limply, hanging upside-down over a pile of rubble. The perspective is that of standing on a cliff or balcony, and beyond the inverted flag I look out over the skyline of Dubai, half sunk beneath desert sand.

An upside-down flag can mean a variety of things, all of which are at work here. Most typically, an upside-down flag signals an SOS. Perhaps the 33rd are in distress; some Americans need you to come save their souls.

The US Flag Code states that the US flag should *never* be flown upside-down except in dire distress. But maybe this flag is being flown upside-down because of the first half of that sentence: the 'never' rather than the 'distress'. Perhaps the 33rd have rebelled and defected. Are they calling for help or are they rejecting any affiliation? Or perhaps both? Later in the game, intel

explains that Konrad has blacked out the stars of the US flag to create the Damned 33rd's own flag. It's a duality of meanings: distressed souls rebelling; rebellious souls in distress.

Beyond the flag is sand-sunken Dubai, the oppressive setting of *The Line*. *The Line* very much sets itself up as videogames's equivalent of *Heart of Darkness* or *Apocalypse Now*. Conrad's novel looked at the darkness in the heart of mankind, at how even 'civilised' man is still, under all those constructed layers, a beast of dualities. The 'other' of Conrad's time was the African that just so happened to live in the lands that the British Empire 'discovered' and colonised. In the time of Conrad's filmic revision of the tale, back in the 70s, it was the communist in Asia that sparked the fear of the other in western civilisation. Today, after 9-11 and with two ongoing occupations, it is the Arabic other that captures the brunt of the Western zeitgeist.

Arguably, the United Arab Emirates' Dubai is seen as the West's foot-in-the-door into the Middle East. Or, at least, capitalism's foot-in-the-door. The West certainly doesn't 'own' Dubai, but Western culture and sensibilities are widespread. It's a Middle Eastern city where Westerners can feel safe, 'at home,' like this is different from the rest of the Arab world. Dubai is a city that we look at and we understand.

But in *The Line* the sands of that very Arabic world that terrifies the West have engulfed and destroyed Dubai, taking an entire battalion of US troops with it. Against the encroachment of the West, the world (at least, the natural world) has fought back.

So that is what you first see when *The Line* starts—before it starts, even: a blunt, pessimistic view of the fall of an expansionist empire, one covered in the sand it fears and crying for help even as it refuses any ties. Over it all, Jimi Hendrix's tired, warped, electric rendition of "Star Spangled Banner" plays on a record player that sounds like it is on its last legs. It's hard to tell what distortion is Hendrix's guitar and what is the music player dying—a distorted anthem for a dying empire.

Protest era music is a reoccurring motif of *The Line* in what is one of the game's clearest nods to *Apocalypse Now*. Not directly through using songs that were used in *Apocalypse Now*, but through using songs from around the same time, about the same war. The songs used throughout the game give a sense of irony to the bloodshed. At this stage, though, on the menu, Hendrix's warped take on a national anthem just says that America's iron

grip on the rest of world is perhaps on its way out. Or, at the very least, it speaks to a decline in confidence, where even the national anthem comes in stuttered, uncertain bursts. This decline in confidence is something that Agent Riggs will allude to later as he lies dying.

*

Choosing 'New Game' allows the menu screen itself to act as the game's opening scene. Two helicopters roar over the camera, which lazily lifts up like a bloated fly and follows them down away from the inverted flag and towards the skyscrapers and ruin.

"I can't shake him!" the pilot of one helicopter shouts.

The camera follows the smaller of the two helicopters as the other helicopter peppers it with tracer fire. I assume that the helicopter the camera is chasing is 'my' helicopter but before long it explodes and crashes, and the camera quickly rushes over to the other, the one I had believed to be the enemy.

It's subtle, but it's as though the game is telling me straight away that perhaps it is I who is the enemy in this game.

But I don't really think about that straight away. I am behind a gatling gun with infinite ammo and there are helicopters to shoot.

It's a generic enough opening sequence. I destroy attacking helicopters among the ruins of Dubai as a high pitch drone rings out and the game's credits fade in and out of existence. Finally, as a sandstorm engulfs us, one of the enemy choppers spirals right into us and the screen goes black.

*

"Earlier…" the game says, and throws me back in time.

The opening cut scene after this introduction depicts a calmer time. A man who we are led to believe is Colonel Konrad is preparing his breakfast and reading his newspaper. Walker's voice talks over the top of the scene:

"Is John Konrad the greatest man I ever served with? Well, I don't know. There was this one time in Kabul where he dragged my bleeding carcass half a mile to an evac chopper. So maybe I'm biased. But the facts don't lie. The man is a fucking hero."

Straight away, Walker's (blind) admiration of Konrad is set up. Just like Charles Marlow's obsession with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Walker seems fated to follow Konrad anywhere. Straight away Walker has admitted a bias and, just as quickly, dismissed that bias to objectively claim Konrad is a hero.

The song playing in the background is "R U Still In 2 It?" by post-rock band Mogwai. It's one of their quieter songs. The silly, text-type title of the song mirrors the themes I take out of the entire game. *The Line* doesn't state that shooters are bad. Saying such a thing would be hypocritical because *The Line is* a shooter. What *The Line* does say is, "This is what shooters do," and then it asks, constantly and persistently, if you are okay with this. Are you still into it? What about now? What about now?

Will you still miss me, when I'm gone?
Is there love there, even when I'm wrong?
Will you still kiss me, if you find out?
I will now leave here but don't follow me.

All of *The Line* is about Walker following in Konrad's footsteps—well after Konrad left Dubai himself, as the end of the game shows us. As Konrad steps outside, he passes a Japanese sand garden: content, calm, ordered. The lines perfectly raked around the standing stones. This leads to outside,

where Konrad stands on his morning balcony and looks over the ruins of Dubai. The sheer mediocrity of Konrad getting out of bed and starting his day jars against the devastation outside, as though to say that this is Konrad's everyday existence. This is his empire. Over this, plays the distress signal that brings Walker's squad looking for Konrad and the Damned 33rd: "This is Colonel John Konrad, United States Army. Attempted evacuation of Dubai ended in complete failure. Death toll: too many."

A new scene introduces me to the playable character that I will be joining on this adventure, Captain Walker, and his two squad mates and comrades throughout the game, Lieutenant Adams and Sergeant Lugo. Together they are "Delta Squad." As they make their way through a sandstorm towards Dubai, more credits roll over their introductory banter, ending in "Special Guest: [My Gamertag]". Games adding 'you' to the credits are not a new feature. Games want to seem more active and immersive; they want you to feel like you are part of this. In *The Line*, the effect is not to say "you are a part of this" but to say "you are *complicit* in this." There is no avoiding that I am in part responsible for what will happen in Dubai. My name is right there on the credits. I can't deny it.

"Gentlemen," Walker says as they come down a sand dune and the city appears in the distance. "Welcome to Dubai."

CHAPTER ONE

THE EVACUATION

The Line starts slowly and generically enough by giving me some bits of cover and teaching me the cover controls. I have trouble with the controls at first; they are just similar enough to *Gears of War* to be familiar and just different enough to mess with my muscle memory.

When I say *The Line* is generic, I do not mean bland or unoriginal. I mean 'generic' in the semantic sense of 'genre-ic'. It is a game that solidly attempts to fulfill the role and gameplay of a specific genre: the shooter. Similarly generic about the game is the use of Nolan North to voice the playable character Captain Walker. It is a running joke that Nolan North voices practically every videogame's playable character. His use in *The Line* is very much intentionally generic. North is a talented voice actor, capable of a great range of different voices, but the voice he uses for Walker is the most typically North-ish, almost identical to that of Nathan Drake. Just as the game can only really examine shooters by being a shooter, the use of the

most common and welcoming voice in videogames as my playable character lures me into feeling comfortable. It lets me think that I know exactly what kind of game this is, that I know what is going on. It lowers my defenses.

Even Walker's name is generic. Walker. The one that walks. That is the role of the playable character: to be the player's vehicle through the world and its narrative. And, all the way to his downfall, that is what Walker does: he walks. If he only ever stopped walking forward, so much carnage would be avoided. He just needs to stop walking.

Indeed, the very first landmark I walk past in the game after the initial tutorial cover is a STOP sign. Bright red, pointing right at me. STOP. Just stop. It's foreboding. It doesn't say "Do not enter." It just says STOP. The choices I will make in this game are irrelevant. The only choice I can make is to play or to stop.

I ignore it. Of course I ignore it. Why wouldn't I? I move on.

Not five steps past the stop sign, Lugo says, "What happens in Dubai, stays in Dubai." It is the first of many quippy one-liners that the members of Delta say that don't seem significant at all until my second game. It's a play on a common enough saying, signifying that 'anything goes' in this insular experience that is entirely detached from the rest of our life. "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." Of course, this doesn't work out for Walker. As Konrad explains to Walker in one of the game's possible endings, once men like them cross a line, there is no going home. It's not simply a matter of what happens in Dubai staying in Dubai after Delta leaves and gets back to their 'real' lives. Rather, those who enter Dubai stay in Dubai, and those that leave Dubai are not the same people that entered it.

My squad passes an inverted US flag and some corpses of the 33rd, and walk down a highway jammed with the rusting cadavers of cars that tried to escape the sandstorms. Delta are set up as the most generic, clean-cut of videogame characters. Lugo reflects on how this wild goose chase is wasting the time of "three cold hard handsome killers like ourselves". Perhaps continuing the commentary on the unaware playable characters of most shooters, Walker asks Lugo, "Lugo, do you ever actually hear the shit that comes out of your mouth?"

"No sir," Lugo replies. "I do not. I find it messes with my rhythm."

Videogames are all about finding a rhythm. The rhythm of a kill streak, of an active reload, of 8 goombas being knocked out with a kicked shell. We

find a rhythm and then we lose ourselves to it. Sometimes I just 'zone out' playing *Super Meat Boy*, not even thinking about what my fingers are doing. If I realise I am not thinking, I start thinking about what I'm doing, and that is when I start to fail more, that is when I lose my rhythm. Similarly, if Lugo stopped to think about the things he says, he would lose his rhythm that allows him to unthinkingly be a "cold hard handsome killer".

It doesn't take long for the squad to come across the distress beacon transmitting the message and a freshly killed US soldier. The camera zooms in pretty closely on the corpse's wide-eyed face. The death of this single US troop is meant to be shocking. Or, at least, we are meant to note that it is shocking for the characters. Walker noticeably flinches and looks away as the body collapses out of the jeep. For me, a dead body at the start of a videogame is about the least shocking thing I can think of. In retrospect, that says something about me.

Moments later, we confront the first signs of human life in Dubai. Three gunmen stand atop a bus, looking down at us, assault rifles pointed. Walker takes cover as Lugo tries to reason with them in Farsi, to convince them we are here to help. Obviously, the gunmen are suspicious (for very understandable reasons, I realise as the conflict that happened here becomes clearer as the game progresses).

Because *The Line* is a generic shooter, I know that we have to begin shooting things sooner or later. I have played enough similar games to know that these negotiations are going to fail. I have played enough similar games to know I am going to shoot these men.

Likewise, Walker and Adams expect the situation to go downhill. While Lugo continues to negotiate in Farsi, Adams notes the bus behind the gunmen is filled with sand, and shooting out the windows would wipe them out. To ensure I know what he is talking about, the game paints a big, red, flashing crosshair on the bus's window, almost demanding me to shoot it. Really, this is just a tutorial segment, teaching me a way to exploit the environment that the game will afford time and again

The lead gunman of the group, who has been listening to Lugo negotiate, looks over and sees Walker and Adams whispering. He assumes we are plotting to kill them and orders his men to open fire. Instantly, without even really thinking, I shoot at the big red crosshair and crush them under sand.

What's perhaps ironic about this scene is that we *were* plotting how to kill them. This conflict which precedes all the game's conflicts happened because this is a shooter and both Walker and myself assumed there would be shooting. There just had to be. In a strange kind of confirmation bias, the game taught me how to be violent—the characters planned how to be violent—at a time when violence might not have been the only way out of the scenario. Like Neo knocking over The Oracle's vase in *The Matrix*, the scene ended in violence because I knew it would end in violence.

This leads into the game's first shootout. It's a typical shootout, mechanically no different to what you would find in any other cover-based shooter and thematically no different to what you would find in any other modern military-themed shooter. Masked, generic Arabic men with scarves over their face shout in a foreign language as they shoot at us, and we three American men just put them down as we slowly move forward from one piece of cover to the next.

*

It's interesting just how removed these opening levels are in every way. The language Walker uses when directing Delta is neutral and disassociated from the violence he is asking his men to perform: "Fire on my target"; "Put him down." No talk of killing or of humans or, of course, of killing humans. Delta's responses are equally neutral: "Moving to clear". At this stage, the action is not about killing, it's simply about shooting at targets. At this early stage of the game, Walker and Delta are successfully able to 'other' the enemy as to not seem too human.

As part of an interview with *The Line*'s Lead Designer, Cory Davis, before the game's release, *Kill Screen*'s Yannick Lejaq muses over the othering of enemy combatants in military shooters, saying that:

> "A game writer once explained to me how his development team did its best to 'otherize' the enemy in the story it was trying to tell. Military shooters direct a terrific level of violence at more obviously human subjects than other genres of games. If people have any natural aversion to shooting one another—and many theorize that we indeed do—then a game has to convince you that killing these people isn't just acceptable, but desirable,

> even enjoyable. So the animators did the best to conceal the faces of your enemies even as they charged at the player, he explained, and the story piled on their atrocities that you witnessed."

There are countless examples of how videogames do this. Be it through repeated enemy models, balaclavas to hide faces, a lack of names, or a justification of the enemies as pure evil. In the *Call of Duty* games, moving the crosshair over any allied NPC will tell the player what that NPC's name is, humanising them. No such name appears for each enemy soldier gunned down without a second thought.

At this stage of *The Line*, the enemies are as typically othered as in any other military shooter. They are Arabic. They wear scarves over their faces. They speak in a language many players won't understand. They seem to be 'evil' in the way they attack us (even though we started it) and, in the next chapter, with what they do to the captured 33rd soldiers (even though they started it).

I've seen a lot of people left perplexed by these opening sequences, confused and troubled. "Is this it?" they ask on Twitter as Nolan North narrates his character's every whim while the player shoots waves of Arabic enemies, not sure what the big deal about this game is. Most games, even those dependent on a linear narrative, you can grasp pretty early on. The meaning is in the tone of the audiovisuals and the rhythm of the mechanics. You play a game for ten minutes or so, and you get the vague idea of what 'kind' of game it is going to be. With *The Line*, it is not that simple. It has a slow pay-off. It demands an investment with the promise that it will give a return later on. The opening chapters are only meaningful when the later chapters subvert the promises and expectations the opening chapters set up for the player—namely, the promise that you will get to be a hero in this story. On their own, these opening scenes truly are generic and uninteresting. You could probably argue that this is poor game design. Personally, I think it is magnificently daring, and I wish more games would do it. *The Line* is not a static character going through a series of events; it is an evolving character going through a narrative *arc*. The opening chapters don't work without the later chapters, and the later chapters don't work without the opening chapters.

The mechanics, however, do not evolve throughout the game. This will, I don't doubt, disappoint some players who will argue that it should be the

mechanics that evolve, not the narrative—this is a *game* after all. For me, I think what you 'do' *does* change over the course of the game. Even if your actions remain the same mechanically, tonally they change drastically. *The Line* is a perfect example of how mechanics do not exist in a vacuum distinct from a game's audiovisual representation. As Walker changes, as his situation changes, what I do with him inevitably feels different.

What I am doing is the most conventional of cover shooting. Since *Gears of War* popularised cover shooters (after Playstation 2 titles *Winback: Covert Operations* and *Headhunter* introduced the idea) the genre has received much criticism for being conventional and boring. It's an unfair judgment, I think—one based solely on the mode's popularity. Cover shooters capture that exhilarating sensation from when I was a kid, playing with stick-guns or water pistols in the back yard. We would flatten up against walls like covert commandos, rolling from our cover behind a drainpipe to the security of a tree, shooting at each other opportunistically. In shooters, using cover has always been important, but cover shooters take the spectacle of having your back to the wall as bullets whiz past and make that central to the experience. It's not just tactical; it's exciting.

The Line's particular brand of cover shooting reminds me most of *Uncharted*. There's an opportune desperation to *Uncharted*'s gunplay where Drake is running from cover to cover, flinching from bullets and cowering from grenades. He tosses away guns as often as he reloads them. As Drake, I am not stoically holding the line, but frantically trying to survive against impossible odds. It's a tone of cover shooting I thoroughly enjoy, but which felt entirely out of place in *Uncharted*. As has been frequently commented upon, killing hundreds of men as Nathan Drake never feels right. *The Line*, then, gives *Uncharted*'s combat a context. Just like Drake, Walker scavenges in the sand for fifteen more bullets, cowers behind walls, swears as he runs out of ammo. It's not just Walker's voice that carries the ghost of Nathan Drake; it haunts his body, too, travelling up the cable and through the controller into the player's hands. Walker *feels* like Drake.

The Line is solid and generic. It does this to lull us into a false sense of security before it pulls that safety blanket out from under us and forces us to see the people we are shooting as human beings. It will, in the coming chapters, make them American. It will make their screams English. It gives us opportunities to hear their conversations. A recurring motive of this reading will be the way

The Line refuses to let me other the 33rd troops when I start fighting them.

Of course, it is worth noting that while the enemies I face become less othered as the game proceeds, the Arabic people are never less othered themselves but merely replaced with more relatable Western enemies (more relatable to a Western audience, at least). On one hand, this is certainly problematic. Nothing that *The Line* does works to de-otherise Arabic people so dramatically othered in other shooters and media more broadly. But, on the other hand, by replacing them with US soldiers halfway through the game, *The Line* forces the player to realise they are—have always been—shooting humans. How many players draw that connection back to consider the 'insurgents' of the early levels as human, however, is questionable.

There is one small nod to the human nature of these Dubai natives, however. Right at the start, right after I shoot my first person, Lugo asks who these people are, and Adams notes they are the refugees.

Refugees.

It's striking to me for a couple of reasons. Firstly, they are refugees made homeless in their own homeland, not refugees as we commonly perceive those that cross the borders into our developed nations. In Australia, over the last decade there has been a particularly vile discourse around refugees where that word is regularly replaced with "illegal immigrant" in a rhetorical move to criminalise and dehumanise them. 'Refugee' is too forgiving. It suggests we have a responsibility to help them. So we try to avoid it because our government wants the votes of the fearful masses that don't like brown people. It's interesting, then, to see the word used for the masses you are gunning down in *The Line*. Its use is strangely personalising, even if it is sandwiched between uses of the word 'insurgent'.

*

The violence gets a bit more intimate when the game teaches me how to perform executions and melee attacks. Pressing 'B' knocks an enemy down, but they get back up if I don't put them down permanently by standing over them and pressing B again to execute. Walker kneels down and punches the man in the face.

Standing back up in a small cut scene, he stretches his muscles and takes some deep breaths. Already, he looks exhausted from the skirmishes so far.

Already, the fighting is having a greater effect on his body than it would on most playable characters that shrug off all injuries and pressures. "I thought we were rescuing people," Walker pants.

An explosion in the distance gives us a new objective as American voices call for help over the radio. At last, 'real' survivors, right? Not just these typical Arabic insurgents but Americans with names and ranks. They need to be rescued!

Several more skirmishes teach the remaining mechanics of the game. There's the ability to give Adams and Lugo orders to kill specific enemies. It's a simple and intuitive ability: hold down right bumper, paint an enemy, and Walker will tell the best-suited ally to take out that enemy. If the enemy is far away, he'll tell Lugo to use his sniper rifle. If Walker has his silencer on, he'll tell Adams and Lugo to take targets out quietly. At this stage this is nothing special, but it is something else we will watch evolve along with the characters.

We approach a large plane crashed in the sand, clearly brought down by the storm, and flank the insurgents who have cornered the American squad. As we fight our way onto the plane, one of the three remaining Americans is shotgunned in the back. Then one is executed and the final survivor is taken hostage. We try to save him but ultimately fail. Before he dies, though, he tells us they have taken another soldier to "The Nest". Outside, tracks are heading north deeper into Dubai. Walker decides to follow them.

At this point, it's worth noting how much it seemingly matters that Americans are being killed, and how little it matters that we are slaughtering all these Arab refugees. This will all change when the mirror is later turned squarely on my own actions. For now, it leads Walker and his men deeper into Dubai—bucking our orders to just make contact and get out—as the game leads me into a false sense of security, into thinking I know what to expect from this experience.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DUNE

Chapter Two sees Walker and his men start to enter Dubai properly, climbing up off a sand dune onto the helipad of a mostly-buried skyscraper. Logos on the wall suggest the building houses a television network.

As we approach the adjacent circular, glass-walled building from the outside, I start finding boxes of grenades. This sets up another generic learn-how-to-use-this-mechanic section where I'm encouraged to lob grenade after grenade at groups of insurgents hiding in the next tower.

At this point, I start to hear what sounds like the first proper music since the game commenced. There have been moments of faint background guitars or the constant drone over the opening helicopter sequence, but here there is an actual, diegetic song playing from somewhere within the building. At first I can't figure out the actual song, but it is clearly a 60s (or thereabouts) protest-era song.

There's an easy irony gained from using protest-era songs to the background of conflict footage. Here I am, tossing grenade after grenade at these men while what I soon figure out is "Hush" by Deep Purple plays over the top:

Hush, hush
I thought I heard her calling my name now
Hush, hush
She broke my heart but I love her just the same now
Hush, hush
Thought I heard her calling my name now
Hush, hush
I need her loving and I'm not to blame now

The idea of the song's narrator being lured by a woman they know they should stay away from seems particularly telling as Walker bucks his proper

orders, delves deeper into the city, and starts lobbing grenades at refugees.

On some inner, subconscious level, it's meant to make us feel uneasy about our actions. Here I am, just lobbing grenades at people while this song plays the vaguest of critiques about being lured in. But, further, we are meant to disregard that urge to question our own actions as quickly as it arises. When Lugo disbelievingly asks "Does anyone else hear music?" during the skirmish, Walker responds, "Who cares? Shut up and keep fighting!" as I lob two more grenades. Like Walker, the shooter player is assured that they don't have to worry about ethical quandaries, that they can just keep shooting. Forget the music and the questions it raises. Who cares? Just keep fighting.

*

The Line does this strange slow-motion thing with headshots where if you shoot someone in the head, time briefly slows down for about one second. The audio slurs, time drags, and blood blooms as the bullet connects with the target's head, and they start to collapse. The same effect occurs with a direct hit from a grenade. Time slows as the limbs are torn from the body in a brief red puff of blood before speeding back up as the disturbed sand leaves yellow clouds hanging in the air.

Lots of games reward headshots or otherwise 'good' kills. Whether it is the congratulatory bonus points of *Bulletstorm* or just the quick, efficient kill of any game that has you shooting humanoids. One that always felt a bit strange to me was the 2010 revamp of *Medal of Honor*. The game itself claimed to show how America's current wars are 'really' fought[2]—solely from the perspective of American troops, of course. Beneath all the jingoism there is something of a heaviness to that game, a solid 'thump' to the violence that is entirely non-celebratory and almost somberly respectful. That is, until you get a headshot. Every headshot is rewarded with a medal. This medal doesn't do anything; it just tells you that you successfully shot some guy in the face. It's weird and self-congratulatory. Like a hardy pat on the back for killing a human being with the least amount of bullets possible. Those things are expensive, you know?

2. A promotional video for the game, titled "Authenticity" is exemplary of this claim: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hn1cobOotz8

In *The Line*, the brief slow-down does the same thing, but as the game goes on and time slows with *every single* headshot and grenade-enabled body-rending, what at first feels like stylish, romanticised 'good' shots just become unsettling. It's like I'm *A Clockwork Orange*'s Alex having my eyelids forced open to confront the ultraviolence I commit. I don't want to see the slow-motion any more, but I am forced to.

Contrasting (and perhaps diminishing) this is the progress bar that pops up in the corner every-other headshot that informs me of how many more headshots I need before I get the achievement for 250 headshots. While the slow-motion tries to rub my face in what I have done, the progress bar temps me to do it again and again. Like the game wants me to admit that I love this terrible thing.

Attacking the news station, lobbing grenade after grenade after grenade (as the segment is clearly set up for me to do), time plays like a broken record. Fast as the insurgents see the grenade, yelp, and start to run. Slow as it explodes, picks up their bodies and throws them in pieces across the room. Even the Deep Purple song speeds up and slows down in time with my violence. In fact, it *is* a broken record. Looping over and over until I get through this segment.

*

On the far side of the news station, a PA announcement plays out of the same makeshift speakers as the song: an American voice, claiming the 'ceasefire' between the 33rd and (one assumes) the refugees is off. But it sounds strangely happy about this fact. As Adams says, this is when it officially gets weird. He insists to Walker that they've already completed their mission objective of finding survivors and that they should radio for evac.

Walker still says no. Not until we find Konrad and the kidnapped soldier. It's always one more thing, one more step deeper into Dubai.

She's got loving like quicksand.
Only took one touch of her hand
To blow my mind and I'm in so deep
That I can't eat and I can't sleep.

From here, I fight my way across a few more rooftops to a final battle where we are pinned down in an ambush as a storm approaches. Two chapters into the game, and it's all still very much run-of-the-mill shooter with the occasional allusion to what is to come. During this final battle of the chapter, Lugo shouts "Die you fucker!" as he drops an enemy. It's easily missed over all the gunfire, but it is surprising to hear, and is the earliest sign I've noticed of Delta's sheen beginning to crack. Adams berates Lugo for his language, and Walker tells him to keep his cool.

Eventually, the storm approaches, rips out the floor from underneath us, and plunges us down into the top of a buried skyscraper.

CHAPTER THREE

UNDERNEATH

Chapter Three is perhaps the least interesting of all of *The Line*'s chapters, not at all helped by a rather large dose of ludonarrative dissonance not too far into it. Or perhaps it is no less interesting than the two chapters that came before it, and at this stage I am just tired of such conventional, generic gameplay. In the next chapter, finally but slowly, it will start to get interesting when Delta actually starts fighting the 33rd and their ambiguous ethical standing is interrogated. In Chapter Three, however, we have been fighting generic Arab insurgents for a while now, and it is easy to begin wondering if stuff is actually going to change.

After falling through the ground at the end of the previous chapter, Walker and his team are now in a buried, fancy hotel of grand pianos, marble floor, florally columns. It gives me a weird kind of vertigo where I realise that until this point the ground I had been walking on was metres above the 'real' ground, atop a mountain of sand that was burying entire skyscrapers. (Somehow the fact Walker had pulled himself up onto a helipad at the beginning of the previous chapter was not a blunt enough hint).

Because a door is locked, the squad must hold their ground against waves of insurgents jumping down through the hole in the ceiling. Yet, the moment they drop C4, Adams is able to shoot the door open in a second for our escape. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, and is perhaps the single most annoying part of the game for me.

Further into the hotel, after a brief silence, Adams ponders if we should try to stop fighting against the refugees: "Anyone else feel like we should talk to these guys again? I mean we did come here to save them." It's interesting to see an in-game character acknowledge that all this violence started over a simple misunderstanding.

"Man we are waaay past that point," replies Lugo. "These people don't want to talk. They are out for blood."

Walker agrees with Lugo, saying that the "best we can do is find the 33rd before these people tear them apart,"

These people.

It's perhaps at this point, seconds before we see the first 'bad' American that the schism between 'us' and 'them' is at its widest. Soldiers are people worth saving. The refugees are *these people*, these people who are completely distinguishable from us. These people who are 'out for blood' when it was us who were plotting how we might be able to kill them before the first shot was even fired.

It stands out starkly on my first play, the fact that one of my characters would even think to question our actions. But I as a player can't help but agree with Walker. What choice do I have but to keep going?

*

In the same room is a collectible piece of intel. Intel works as kinds of hidden items to collect, and also gives insights into various perspectives of the Dubai mess, much like *Bioshock*'s tapes give insights into the characters of Rapture.

Various characters are recorded on the intel scattered throughout the game, but Walker himself voices this piece. It's hard to tell if this is just meant to be Walker's thoughts based on the objects he just found, or if the intel is his report recorded after this mission is over. In this piece of intel Walker muses over how the locals are melting down silver jewellery and other valuables to create silver bullets, like the kind one would use in a fairytale to kill a monster. "I guess that makes us monsters," shrugs off Walker, adding as an afterthought: "At least a soldier's life doesn't come cheap."

Here, what is important isn't who is right or wrong, who is humane and who is monstrous, but who is 'worth' more. Walker doesn't mind that the soldiers are monsters in this analogy, as long as killing them is expensive.

And then that is almost instantly complicated and turned on its head in a cut scene when a American walks by, clearly in league with the insurgents, giving them orders, and alluding to how he will violently interrogate the US prisoner from the 33rd.

Of course, it was always somewhat predictable we would end up fighting Americans. The name 'Konrad' might as well be Kurtz. But now we have an

American sided with the locals talking about torturing another American. Things are getting complicated. The generic black-and-white setup of the game—of every shooter—is starting to crack.

After more fighting, Walker and his squad come to an elevator shaft going deeper down into the buried hotel. The entire game can almost be seen as a series of geographical highs and lows that mirror Walker's own emotional journey. Delta starts atop the dune, confident and self-assured. Slowly they begin to descend—both into the depths of themselves and of Dubai. They eventually end up back on rooftops, then plummet down to the underground. Again and again Walker finds something to hold onto; again and again it is ripped away from him—usually with another layer of flesh in tow.

Walker wants to hurry: "Every minute we waste could mean the difference between a soldier going home alive and going home in a bag." The phrase is drenched with irony. Walker is wasting his time in Dubai, and countless soldiers will be dead because of his future actions. Every minute that Walker wastes in Dubai will mean another soldier going home in a bag.

"Let's see what's down the rabbit hole," he says and starts climbing down. An obvious *Alice in Wonderland* metaphor, perhaps, but appropriate, as clear dichotomies such as good/bad and real/unreal begin to break down as Delta descend into the city.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE REFUGEES

The elevators shaft drops us onto a dark, dank level deep under the sand. Lugo comments on the stench. "I'd call that survival," says Walker, defensive of the refugees that live down here.

The back-and-forth of opinions on the survivors of the storms between Adams, Lugo, and Walker is fascinating to me. It's not so simple as each of Walker's comrades representing a different opinion, one empathetic and one ruthless. They swap back and forward. In the previous chapter, Adams wanted to try talking again. This time, Walker is defending the stench, humanising the situation. This is anything but clear-cut.

The walls tell me we are inside a "Financial Centre". What used to be a bank is now a refuge for the survivors. Walls are covered in drawings done by children. A few are of smiling people and trees and sunlight, but as I look closer I see the helicopters gunning people down. The flies over tombstones. The crosses between the flowers. Every picture has a seed of evil.

One picture is a smiling, stick-figure insurgent beside a pile of dead stick-figure Americans with crossed-eyes. Above the smiling insurgent is the word "Daddy". It's a typical drawing by a kid of a parent's occupation. Here, a kid's daddy's job is to kill Americans. Conversely, it means the men trying to kill you are doing so out of desperation, that some of them are fathers. Walker realises this himself when I pick up a piece of intel near the drawings: a ragdoll with diamond eyes. But he suppresses the knowledge as irrelevant: "Anyone shooting us is an enemy."

1
FRAG
50
M4A1

1
FRAG
50
M4A1

Continuing down to the next floor, there is an elaborate stencil painting on the wall. Street art and graffiti is a recurring motif throughout *The Line*. It's a tried and tested way to tell the stories of a long-dead environment—one Valve perfected with *Left 4 Dead*. But in a city pulling itself apart with rebellions and counter-rebellions, it is entirely appropriate. This one, looming over us as we descend down the stairs (and down the rabbit hole) is a chimera of forms. At first I see it as Lady Liberty with her arms stretched out by her side like Christ, showing where the nails went into her palm. In her left hand is her torch, but instead of a flame it is topped in a human skull. In her right hand, where should be a *tabula ansanta* (a tablet inscribed with the law) is an AK-47, as though the only law is violence. She is draped in an American flag with the stars blacked out. Through her head is an arrow. It's as though America has replaced the laws of liberty with a saviour complex and violent interventionism—violence their law and death their light—and, in the process, America has managed to shoot itself in the face.

*

Downstairs, I jump through a hole into a lit lower level. A surreal amount of candles cover the floor and flicker off the walls. Lugo comments on the value of the stuff being used for the refuge: silk, crystal, even a grand piano. The relics of a capitalist culture are meaningless when all that matters is survival.

Walking around a corner, we find US soldiers lined up against a wall and executed. Behind them, someone has painted children's faces on the walls, grinning with blacked-out eyes. In a darkened corner is the financial centre's slogan: "Security in your life."

The savagery of these executions alongside the living conditions of Dubai's people perhaps highlights just what desperation can lead people to do. People who build tents out of silk and execute soldiers against a wall are not crazy; they are just desperate. Similarly, as Walker's actions become increasingly savage through the game, he is not becoming crazier so much as more desperate.

Walker mutters something here about how the executions remind him of the "Kabul Death Squads." It's one of the few times in the game that Walker alludes to the time he served in Afghanistan. It's a part of his history that is never really explored, but whatever happened there when Walker served

under Konrad has clearly influenced Walker's current obsession with the man. Or, perhaps, nothing in particular had to happen there at all; just the day-to-day experience of the Afghani conflict was probably bad enough to leave an impression on him

And, around another corner, we find the last surviving US soldier of the four attacked back in Chapter One. The one we came this far to rescue. He is being 'interrogated' by Agent Kastavin, the American we previously saw leading the insurgents. Kastavin is torturing the soldier, demanding to be told how many soldiers are at the water depot.

The soldier is stubborn: "Fuck you. Dubai would be at peace if you hadn't stirred up the locals."

Just as Kastavin is about to kill the soldier, Walker and his men jump up from cover and point their rifles at Kastavin. The soldier uses the distraction to get a hand loose, take the pistol from Kastavin's hand, and shoot him in the head.

This shocks me. Kastavin, in just the previous chapter, had been set up as though he was to be a major character. His position of authority among the insurgents suggested a major role in the game's plot. But then, just like that, he is dead. This happens often in *The Line*: characters are just killed with no fanfare, no significance, like just another anonymous face among the waves of people I gun down. Yet, this has the inverse affect, at least for me, of making *each* enemy's death more powerful, more significant, by putting the deaths of normal enemies and significant characters on the same, nonplussed level.

More so, Kastavin is dead because of Walker. To be sure, Walker saved the soldier's life, but if he hadn't intervened, Kastavin would still be alive. This, too, is a recurring theme of the whole game: every time Walker and the player try to save a life, other lives inevitably end.

Such is the case with the following tense standoff, and one of the first 'choices' in the narrative the player gets to make. The soldier points his pistol at Walker, and I hold down left trigger to aim Walker's weapons back. I can shoot at any time.

But why would I? At this point, I have yet to be given a reason to attack the 33rd. Only CIA-led insurgents have attacked us so far. Still, it is relatively clear that I will end up fighting the 33rd eventually, and the game tempts me to shoot for the briefest time. Maybe if I don't shoot he will shoot me? In part I'm tempted to pull that right trigger simply to see if I *can* shoot him, but I

hold my ground, and the soldier eventually lowers his pistol. But he refuses to cooperate and jumps down to a lower level.

On my second game, I shot him in the face. Lugo and Adams were appalled. So was I, and I reloaded the game. It simply felt wrong to kill this man.

Lugo asks why I let him go. "I'm not about to shoot a US soldier, Lugo," Walker replies. It's an ironic statement, which, like many of Walker's statements, is completely contradictory to what is about to happen.

Downstairs, we find the CIA hideout, including a collectable intel of Kastavin's diary. He mentions how dismal the situation in Dubai is, noting there are "Soldiers trying to keep martial law. Only making it worse."

It's not just Walker making things worse by trying to help in Dubai; it is everyone. Or, at least, every American. Konrad and the 33rd; the CIA; Delta squad; every American that steps into Dubai hoping to 'help' just brings more sorrow with their good intentions.

But this isn't how it is meant to work—not in videogames or in real life. As Western countries and as playable characters we are meant to be able to just walk into these countries and worlds with our superior knowledge and firepower, and fix everything. There is meant to be an evil and a good. In *The Line*, there are only attempted goods causing evil begetting other attempted goods causing evil. It's an indictment of interventionism, both digitally and actually.

While standing here, I hear voices. It's the soldier I saved. "They gotta be CIA," he says. "We got our orders."

And so begins the first skirmish against American troops. The first one I shoot is the very soldier I saved not five minutes ago. As quickly as he drops Kastavin, I drop him. Dead. Just another enemy on the ground.

We make quick work of the others. There is no talking. It's over as quickly as it started.

"They were soldiers. Our own guys," says Adams, as though having to vocally work through what just happened.

Walker insists it was self-defense.

"That doesn't make it feel any better," Adams argues.

"It's not supposed to."

*

On my fourth playthrough, when I came across Kastavin interrogating the soldier, I was finally able to shoot the soldier as he pointed his pistol at me. I still didn't want to do it, but my desire to see what would happen had become unbearable, so I shot him in the face. Adams and Lugo were aghast that I had shot a US troop. But, because I did, the soldier could never go and get backup, and I was able to pass through the following room without a conflict. It is only when I chose to *not* kill him that I was forced to kill both him and others. Here, at the first binary 'choice' in the game, *The Line* is explicitly telling me that I do not really have any choice at all.

*

In the next room, 33rd soldiers are, apparently, gunning down civilians. They see us and assume we are a part of the CIA unit 'Gray Fox'. The name is a blatant nod to the codename of reoccurring *Metal Gear Solid* character Frank Jaeger, a FOXHOUND operative who was augmented into a cyborg ninja.

Walker orders his squad (and the player) to open fire. Lugo and Adams are reluctant but Walker again insists it is self-defense. "They will kill us if we don't!" By the time he has said this I have already used his shotgun to take out the closest two soldiers.

In contrast to the quick, reflexive 'self-defense' of the previous room, this skirmish is prolonged and chaotic. Walker, Lugo, and Adams are screaming over their own gunfire. "We're not CIA, damn it!" "Cease fire!" Yet, of course, we don't stop shooting, and neither do the 33rd. Everyone wants the fighting to end, but no one is willing to stop first. It's an effective scene if only for the dialog. It transcends the calm tactics of the earlier battles and the war cries of later skirmishes. This is the breaking down of any chance of saving anyone. Just like the very first skirmish where Adams and Walker plotted to shoot the bus, this is simply creating more problems.

Simply changing the human NPCs I am shooting to an ethnicity that more closely reflects my own is a startlingly powerful way to force me to acknowledge the humanity of the targets I am shooting. You don't have to be a consciously racist person to more easily *other* people whose language and cultures you don't understand—it's human nature to do so. As the orders being screamed by the enemies are suddenly in English, suddenly understandable to me, I instantly realise just how much I had othered the insurgents before now.

Before long, I will inevitably start to other the 33rd, too. I must, if I am to keep shooting them. But from this point the game will consistently and systematically force me to remember their humanity. At this early stage, just the fact they are Americans speaking English is enough to make me feel wrong about what I am doing.

Another recurring motif throughout *The Line* is the mannequin, which works to symbolise the way my mind insists on dehumanising the humans I kill. Mannequins are humanoid in shape, but are clearly not human themselves. Later in the game, Walker will begin to hallucinate, seeing mannequins as enemies and enemies and mannequins, as though to blur the border between 'real' and representational humans. In the context of the videogame, the 33rd aren't 'real' humans; they are just virtual mannequins hanging off strings of code. But shooting one in a slow-motion headshot as his buddy screams for help is not the same as a mannequin silently, bloodlessly crumbling. At some point, shooting a target becomes virtual murder.

Why am I talking about the mannequins this early in the game when the hallucination scene is still many chapters away? Because, standing on the far side of the marketplace as I fight through the 33rd in this first battle, are two mannequins. They're easily missed, standing over on a side of the map that you don't ever have to pass through. But they silently look over the battlefield this first time you are really forced to consider your enemies as humans just like you. Silent harbingers of what is to come.

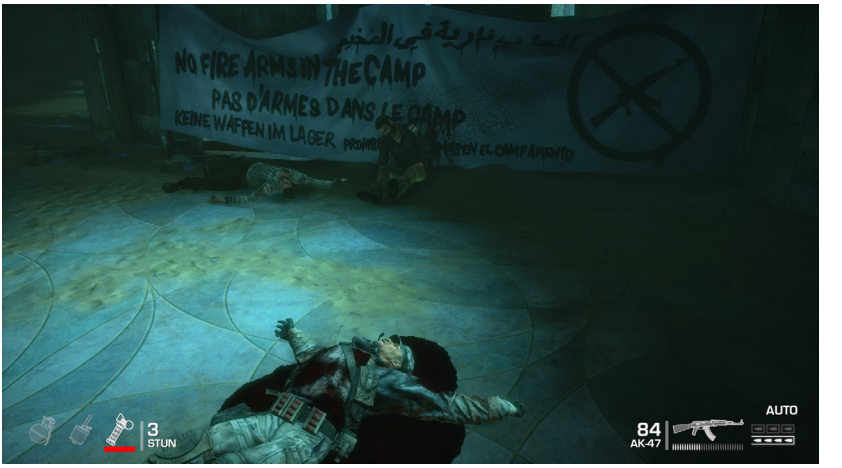
*

In this room I perform an execution on a wounded soldier, and Walker shoots him point blank in the face. It makes me jump. The only other execution in the game so far, right at the start, was a single, swift punch. This was still swift, and I tried to convince myself I was putting him out of his misery, but still, it was brutal.

The executions throughout the game evolve along with Walker's character. In the early stages of the game they feel more like acts of necessity and desperation, mirroring more the *coup de grâce*'s of *Modern Warfare*, where if you don't shoot an injured soldier, he will pull out a pistol and shoot you. But later on, as they become more gruesome and both Walker and the camera begin to revel in the intimate violence, they become more akin to the murders of *Manhunt*: reveled in for the glory of violence itself.

The progress of the executions perhaps feel slightly out of sync with the rest of the game; they become almost too manically brutal before I even realise Walker himself is slowly changing. They seem so jarring at first that I initially intend to not use them at all. It is only when I realize I gain extra ammo from doing them, and the need to put down enemies I've knocked down for good, that keeps me doing them. But perhaps that is the point: the things I am willing to do, even out of character, just for fifteen bullets.

Finally, this first chaotic skirmish is over. The final 33rd is silenced as he dies, and Delta have no one left to scream at.



As we leave the marketplace, we walk past a sign welcoming us to a refugee camp, along with a massive sign warning us that no guns are allowed in the camp. I didn't, on any of my plays, stop to think about the significance of this sign. Fellow games journalist Rob Zacny did, however. In an email to me, which he has graciously allowed me to reprint here, he explains:

> "Just as you hit that first refugee camp, you hit a sign that says no guns are allowed within it. Of course, you walk past fully armed and proceed to blow away a ton of American soldiers who, we later learn, are seriously just trying to manage an orderly evacuation of the city.

> But one thing I like about *The Line* is how the threat of violence, the implicit message of the gun itself, makes all positive outcomes impossible. The entire game is people arriving in this city of dying dreams thinking they can do good, but their only means of doing so is domination of others at gunpoint.
>
> The tragic ironies are wrapped inside one another in this game. You realize your character has been wrong all along, that the guys you're fighting were trying to help the civilians, but we *still* see that they resorted to WP [White phosphorous] attacks and summary executions to keep order. "I'm here to help but if you don't agree with how I'm helping, this M4 reserves me the right to kill you."

From your first encounter on the road into town, until the very end of the game, every encounter goes wrong because both sides are armed. I think what critics of this game don't get is that depriving you of alternative ways to solve the conflict demonstrates just how inevitable violence is when either side is armed. *The Line* is about a mindset that makes those tragedies inevitable. No one can appeal to reason in good faith when he gives himself the power to kill. And that is what every character in this game eventually does.

Here, Zacny succinctly gets at a similar point as I tried to describe about this first conflict with the 33rd: as long as each side is armed, violence is the only way things are going to resolve.

Walker justifies what they did, saying they didn't kill 'US' troops because the 33rd have clearly gone rogue. They are just another enemy now. But despite this, Walker insists that Konrad couldn't have gone rogue. Walker says he "knows the man." So Delta won't pull out. Not until Walker finds Konrad.

Before this, Walker's excuse for not pulling out was to get to the captured soldier. Now it is to get to Konrad. He keeps giving himself one more objective, just one more reason to fall just a bit deeper into Dubai. At any time he could turn and leave but no, he keeps on walking.

*

Through a doorway, we come into an upper floor of a large shopping complex, being able to look over the side of a walkway down multiple floors.

The 33rd are rounding up refugees, taking them away—to kill them, we are lead to believe. While moments ago he was questioning the killing of US soldiers, Lugo now insists that they must be stopped. So quickly the tide has turned: the Arabic refugees should be saved and the Americans butchered.

What the 33rd are actually doing with the refugees is never made explicitly clear. Certainly, they aren't actually rounding them all up to kill them. That wouldn't actually make any sense at all. But at this early stage, both Delta and the player are happy to accept that as the only possible thing that is happening—after all, they are the bad guys. The 33rd would have to be evil to massacre these people. And, since we are fighting them, the 33rd must be evil.

To be sure, it doesn't look entirely like the refugees are going voluntarily. The ones walking off don't have their hands above their heads or anything, but we can see a few smaller groups of refugees restrained away from those walking off, clearly under arrest by the 33rd. But here, I realise, I have assumed that every non-American in the room is on the same 'side' simply because they are all Arabic. Maybe the restrained ones are insurgents trying to stop the 33rd from looking after the refugees?

As we head downstairs, we hear the American DJ over the speakers again. He addresses the refugees (or maybe the insurgents?). "Why?" he asks. "Why?" He laments that the 33rd and the refugees had made peace before this latest (CIA led) insurrection. He tells them that he has no choice in this matter, but plays a song to "see them out." The Black Angel's "Bad Vibrations":

Can you tell a wish from a spell?
A hug from a lie?
They both make you feel so gone.
We warned you from harm again.
You're beating hearts again.

This is the first verse, and pretty closely reflects how it feels to be gunning down the 33rd here. I don't actually *know* they are going to kill all the civilians. But I assume they are going to. Can I tell a hug from a lie? Apparently not. So I start gunning them down as this off-putting, throbbing, discordant guitar plays. The kind of guitar that sounds like it wants to make me vomit.

Fighting our way towards the bottom floor with no real goal other than to kill the 33rd, I stop in cover to gather myself. I have found a grenade launcher and have been exploding soldiers for a while (in the terrible, squelching slow-motion of direct hits). There is a dismembered torso on a waist-high wall beside me. It seemed so…. small. *The Line*'s men aren't large, muscled, steroid beasts. They are just… men. Normal sized.

There is something about the corpses in *The Line*. It's not just that they rarely seem to disappear (as though the game never forgets your crimes). It is something in the faces. The way the eyes and mouths are stuck open, aghast. It actually makes me think of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* saying "The horror! The horror!" before he dies, like each and every 33rd soldier confronts their own personal heart of darkness before I end their life.

I've seen bits of gore painting rooms in dozens of games. In no other game have I thought about who that bit of gore was.

Continuing down, Walker and I move around to flank a turret through a corridor constructed entirely out of suitcases and baggage. What the refugees tried to flee with had become their home. A woman is running towards me and bullets tear through the fabric, causing me to go into cover. Two 33rd men appear and approach my position, but they don't start firing until the lady is out of the line of fire. I don't even note this at the time, that the soldiers clearly *weren't* trying to kill the lady.

Eventually, I get to the turret and kill the last of the soldiers by, again, taking out a window and burying them in sand.

"God save us," Lugo whispers.

The 33rd still got away with a truck of civilians, how many exactly we aren't sure. The ones left are not happy. "Don't need a translator to know they're hurting," says Adams.

I wonder now if the refugees were angry because the 33rd got away with many of their loved ones—or if they were angry at us for scaring off the 33rd. Maybe they are also angry at us for destroying the glass wall, effectively destroying the only cover they had from the storms. You don't need a translator to know these people are hurting, perhaps, but without a translator it is all too easy to assume they are hurting because of somebody else, not because of us.

Indeed, Lugo does translate: "These people want us gone."

Everyone wants Delta to leave Dubai, but we don't. We continue onwards.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EDGE

Walking down another dune during the cut scene that begins this chapter, Walker is thinking about Delta's next move. He assumes the 33rd went to war with themselves, and the winning side now owns Dubai. He wants to make contact with the CIA to find Konrad. Clearly, his own bias still has him in denial. He still thinks Konrad is guiltless despite everything pointing to the opposite. So on we walk.

Lugo intercepts a transmission of a CIA agent, Lt Daniels, being interrogated and tortured by the 33rd, and Walker decides we have to rescue him in order to find Konrad. Whereas the last CIA agent died because he was torturing a 33rd soldier (that we tried to save), now a CIA agent is being tortured *by* a 33rd soldier (and we are trying to save him). Allegiances are fickle things in sand-swept Dubai.

There's a character in the television series *MASH* called Colonel Flagg who appears a couple of times every other season. He's a bigheaded CIA operative who trusts no one—a satirical personification of the 1950s' "reds under the bed" paranoia. While from the outside Flagg seems entirely insane, he is entirely confident in his own convictions. In one episode he describes his paranoid state to the characters (swaggering that way that he swaggers with his thumbs under his belt): "I live in a constant state of confusion." Flagg ensures that he is constantly confused so that he is able to stay on top of things. He is sure to never stop and try to make sense of the world he has constructed for himself; if he did, nothing would make sense.

A constant state of confusion is pretty much how the player must live in *The Line*. You are never really sure who are the 'good' guys and who are the 'bad' guys, and you never really find out. With Walker, I change allegiances about as regularly as I change magazines. Of course, the same could be said for the vast majority of military shooters with their tacked-on and incoherent narratives. As much as I enjoy the *Modern Warfare* series, the plot is shot through with logic-holes that never make sense. The difference

with *The Line*, I think, is that the confusion is deliberate. Whereas in most games the player's confusion is a result of poor writing, both the player's and Walker's confusion in *The Line* is due to a scenario so well written that there truly are no good or bad guys. The only way to make sense of *The Line* is to be constantly confused.

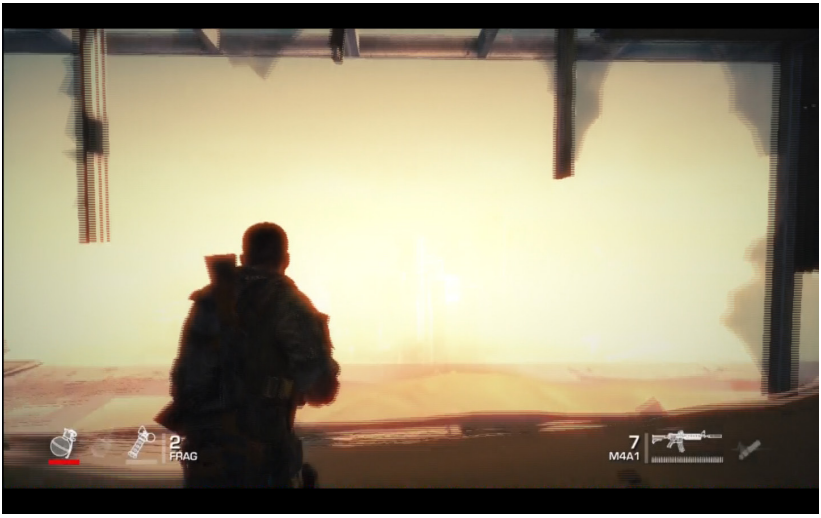
Or maybe the difference is meaningless. Be it because of good writing or because of bad writing, I allow myself to stay constantly confused while I play military shooters so that I never notice that my actions don't make any sense. I just go through the motions.

Maybe this is going too far, but Walker's first name is Martin. His initials—M and W—are each the flip of the other. I doubt this was intentional, but it's indicative of the topsy-turvy world Walker has walked into—and that he refuses to walk out of.

*

The cut scene ends and the mission starts proper as I walk Walker out onto an overhang to look down on the game's most jawdropping vista. A canyon of sand drops before me, so far that I can't see the bottom in the darkness. It's almost vertigo inducing as I have to recalibrate my understanding of where I am. During the cut scene, I assumed I was on the ground, walking down a sand path. But here, I realise I am not at the bottom but at the top. Skyscrapers protrude from the chasm, their ceilings deep in the chasm. Dubai is *beneath me*. The very world I'm walking through is topsy-turvy.

There's an interesting way the game reveals upcoming areas. Often you walk through a doorway to the next 'section', but what is through the doorway is nothing but a blurry, sandy haze until you step through it and the next part of the world suddenly comes into vision. This happens at the moment I step out to look over the canyon. A hazy wall conceals the path ahead of me until I step through it and 'the edge' that Walker will soon literally and figuratively tumble into appears before me.


2
FRAG
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2
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This is either a deliberate trick to conceal and reveal the world for the player in certain ways, or an inherent limitation to how the Unreal engine works in *The Line*, loading chunks of world as you walk into them. Maybe it is both. It has the effect of walking from one spatial location to another feel less like walking through a consistent space and more like travelling between memories that have been threaded together like a highlights reel. It suggests that Walker is dreaming or reliving events, that we as players can't completely trust the version of the world we are experiencing through Walker.

Reality or not, we head down into the chasm to follow the signal. Lt Daniels torture continues to play over the speakers dangling around the world as we continue. We take a zipline to a skyscraper deeper in the canyon, and head down some stairs where two guards are looking over the chasm. I shoot them without thinking, and continue down. In the next room, I get killed by more soldiers and reappear at the previous checkpoint, back on top of the building.

The Line's checkpoints are one of the few things that bother me about the game. They always feel just too far apart and on the wrong side of cut scenes that I end up having to skip over and over again. Often, I pass through a moment of silence between skirmishes that I assume will have a checkpoint but never do.

This time, however, the spread out checkpoints allow me an insight I nearly missed. On my next life, I remember my M4's silencer. There had only been one moment before now where stealth was an option, and I had completely forgotten about it until now. Well, really, stealth is never actually an option. Every opportunity to use stealth inevitably falls apart, landing Delta in another skirmish. Much like the binary pseudo-choices Walker faces throughout the game, the many pseudo-stealth segments suggest to Walker and the player that they can try to get through a situation quietly and neatly all they want, but violence is always going to end messily.

This time, I plan to sneak up on the two stairway guards silently, and that is when they start talking.

One of the guards asks the other for some gum and reluctantly accepts the last piece after the first guard assures him that the gum actually belongs to someone else. Then they start to talk about the canyon before them:

"Sometimes I just come out here at night and listen to the wind," one says.

"Yeah, reminds me of how the wind used to howl where I grew up," the other replies.

"Kinda peaceful, actually."

"Hard to believe there could be peace in a place like this, huh?"

"You got to look for peace, no matter where you are, man. Helps you remember what we're fighting for."

There is so much in this short dialog to unpack.

Firstly there is the blending of the 33rd soldiers' sense of belonging to Dubai and a homesickness for the America they can never return to without being detained as traitors. The wind reminds one of the soldiers of where he grew up, bringing this clash of new-home and old-home together. The 33rd are a displaced people, which, perhaps, is kind of ironic. Displaced people are those that have to leave their homes because of war and set up new homes elsewhere. Refugees. They face great danger and persecution if they try to leave their homes, and more if they stay. If they do get to a new, safe home, they still face persecution from an untrusting group of people who think these outsiders will steal their jobs or destroy their way of life. What's weird here is that the soldiers themselves are now the displaced, the 33rd have become refugees. Dubai is not just the place that is persecuting the 33rd; it is their sanctuary from a government that sees them as deserters. This is strengthened further in a piece of intel somewhere in the game (I can't for the life of me remember where) that is the records of one of the 33rd soldiers, talking about his family back home in the states. He is sad that he will probably never see them again, but he feels a loyalty to the people of Dubai that don't have the security of his own family.

Then there is the idea of having to look for peace no matter where you are, the idea that peace is 'inside of you' rather than out there. It's an idealistic thing to say, given another layer of irony when squads of Western soldiers regularly march into other countries, 'bringing' peace with them, rather than trying to find a peace native to the countries they invade.

Then there is the second half of that sentence: that peace helps you know what you are fighting for. The irony is thick and the meanings fold back in on themselves in a knot of paradoxes. On one level, it is nice, humanising, and sentimental. On another, it shows the completely blind arrogance and ideology of humankind to believe violence and fighting is ever a way to peace. We saw this lived out just in the previous chapter as Delta called to the 33rd to lay down their weapons even as we shot them all. We saw it in the first conflict of the game that started simply because we were plotting to start it. Violence begets violence.

I shot these two in the face the first time I passed them and missed this entire conversation. The second time, I listened for too long, and they turned around, sounded the alarm, and I died. One way or another, this—everything—is going to end in violence.

The third time, I marked the two men for Lugo and Adams, and they dropped them silently before the first soldier had finished asking for gum. In a weird way, the conversation about peace and home and fighting never actually happened. Reloading and rewinding time had unravelled its very existence. There was just violence.

Downstairs, now, because I was successfully covert, the soldiers in the next room are having a conversation I missed on my first life, too. A Major is being briefed on "Operation Reclamation" that I don't doubt is the refugee roundup Delta had interjected on. The Major is told the operation suffered major casualties and that there are "remaining Gray Fox members in the vicinity", which is obviously us. To my surprise, the Major's next, somewhat worried question is "What about the civilians? Did we get them out in time?" He is told they got 30 or 40 out.

"God damn it," the Major responds. Sighing, he adds: "Forgive them, for they know not what to do."

I have not heard this quote for over a decade, but twelve years of Catholic schooling ensured that it has been engraved on my memory forever. It is a quote from Jesus Christ, said while hanging by nails from his cross, asking for forgiveness of those that put him there. The soldier apparently doesn't hear or doesn't understand his Major and responds, "Excuse me, sir?"

"Nothing," the Major responds. "Never mind."

Does the soldier consider himself Jesus? Does he consider the 33rd the misunderstood saviours of Dubai's refugees? Has Walker's mind inserted this quote into his own memories that we are replaying, absolving himself of his sins by having the 33rd, those who he has done wrong by, offer Walker their forgiveness. How was Walker to know what he was doing?

Then there is the juxtaposition of the bible quote next to a blasphemy. A "God damn it". Another topsy-turvy turn of language. Everything good in this world is tainted by paradox. "Everything is teetering on the edge of everything," as Konrad will tell us in a few chapters. Dualities and pluralities and contradictions and paradoxes are everywhere, as pervasive as the sand.

But what is war if not a paradox? And what are military videogames if not

a paradox of paradoxes?

I never got to ask the Major about the quote. Within seconds we were gunning him and his men down, moving down through a sand-covered gym, hiding behind treadmills and slaughtering them as we moved forward.

*

This continues for several more skyscrapers. As we go, I notice Walker getting more vocal. He shouts "threat eliminated" sometimes now when he kills an enemy. Before, he was never vocal after a kill. Sometimes he even says the slightly more disturbing "Got one!" He's not quite revelling in his violence yet, but he is getting close.

As we fall through the glass roof of another building (another floor beneath us being flipped to be a roof above us), another diegetic song plays. "The First Vietnamese War" by The Black Angels:

You gave a gift to me
In my young age
You sent me overseas
And put the fear in me
And I ask what for now
Why me, why war?

The song is addressed to the US state, accusing 'you' of forcing 'us' to fight 'your' war. While the song was produced in 2006, it takes the form of a pretty typical Vietnam War protest song. Perhaps its use here is nothing but a nod to *Apocalypse Now*'s time and setting. Like much of the game's music, the song's discordant guitars give a tingling sense of lunacy to the fight. Something about it just isn't right.

In this fight, I face off against my first 'close combatant' enemy. These enemies run at Walker wielding a knife, right at him through the middle of all the bullets with the sole intent of trying to slash you. In his essay on *The Line*, Tom Bissell notes how it is funny that in a gunfight, it is the man with a knife that is somehow the most terrifying. It's the sheer *in*humanity of it, I think. This man must be either on drugs or just so far gone mentally that he just doesn't give a shit about his own life. He is more concerned about

spilling your blood than he is about his own existence. Delta and I can still perhaps convince ourselves that we are causing bloodshed in self-defense, but this knife-wielding man's primary goal, above all else, is to shed blood. What is so unnerving about him is that in his sunglasses I see a warped reflections of myself. Why play a shooter in the first place if you *don't* want to shed blood?

Many minutes later, once the fight is finally over, Lugo notes, "Holy shit. Did you see that psycho with the knife?"

I like that the game acknowledges him. They don't mention it until the battle is over, but Delta are clearly unnerved by such a man existing.

Adams responds, "Yeah. A guy like that can fuck you up."

What's interesting is, in only a few more chapters, Adams will start to become "a guy like that" himself as he slits his first victim's throat.

*

We take another zipline to another building, even deeper and lower in the canyon. We are moving deeper in Dubai, deeper into the maw, into darkness, over the edge, into insanity.

Walker notes, casually, that he remembers the DJ (the "Radioman") that is apparently running the show. He says Konrad trusted him fully, but Walker always thought him suspicious. Now Walker thinks Konrad's trust "caught up to him". He doesn't say it explicitly, but it seems Walker believes this Radioman somehow led a rebellion of the 33rd against Konrad. This sounds pretty absurd. Surely some hippy disc jockey isn't going to lead these men away from their Colonel. Still, Walker seems willing to hold on to any reason he can for Konrad to still be one of the 'good' guys.

In the same room is an intel left by the Radioman himself, talking about an "evacuation cover up". In this intel we learn that the Radioman originally came to Dubai as a journalist with *Rolling Stone*. He is here for a scoop, for a story on 'What Really Happened' in Dubai. Is it perhaps possible that Walker doesn't trust Radioman simply because he isn't military? There was that offhand remark in the game's opening cut scene where Walker scoffs at the player "safe at home" while Konrad bravely led his men into battle. Radioman is not military, and he is not simple. He is an enigma. Walker

doesn't trust him because he can't understand him.

Going through another door, the graffiti "LIAR'S LAIR" is splashed on a wall, with an arrow pointing to the left, where the hall has collapsed and left a gaping pit. After detouring around the pit through a different room, Walker tries to kick a door open and a tidal wave of sand knocks him back and plunges him into the pit—into, apparently, the Liar's Lair. In a very over-the-top, *Uncharted*-esque scene, Walker (I actually just wrote Drake and had to delete it) is sent down the hole, thrust out of the building, slides down the skyscraper, and only just slows his fall by grabbing one-handed onto a protruding pole and clipping his rope.

It is all incredibly unrealistic and action-movie-esque. Hearing Nolan North yelp and bark as Walker fell made me think of Nathan Drake, but when Walker wakes up, he has injuries. His shirt is torn; his eye is blackened; he is bleeding from a head wound. Nathan Drake often manages to convince us that he is hurt—it is part of the reason he is so likeable—but the injuries are only ever temporary. Even a bullet in the chest halfway through *Uncharted 2* is quickly forgotten mere minutes later. But Walker's wounds never heal—neither the physical nor emotional ones. Every fall, crash, and burn that marks his body builds on top of those already there to gradually and systemically destroy Walker's body throughout the game.

In a podcast on *Gamespot*, Walt Williams, *The Line*'s writer, notes that the game is about "peeling back the layers of the characters," about "what happens to all these people where no matter what they do, it continues to become worse around them."

As Williams peels back the layers on these characters, the game literally peels back their flesh. This is just the first of many moments through the game that Walker and his squad become more and more visibly injured—both physically and mentally. This will escalate over the course of the game. Walker has been thrown down into the darkness of Dubai and the layers of his character, along with the layers of his body, are staring to be pulled back to reveal the darkness sitting underneath, just waiting to bubble to the surface.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PIT

As Walker wakes after hitting the ground hard, a mission objective ticks green in the corner of the screen: "Keep going down." Objective complete.

It's almost like the game is mocking me. "Going down" was never something I was trying to do. It was never even an objective that was given to me previously. But now it is an objective I have completed, something that was inevitably going to happen if Walker and I continued with the mission. I would go down. Walker would go down.

This continues the metaphor of Dubai's spatial configuration itself representing Walker's mental decline, much like the rivers do in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. By plummeting into this pit, Walker's descent seems to have just been accelerated somewhat.

The following fight is one of the game's grittiest and most intimate so far—and also one of the most frustrating. Walker is armed only with a magnum and five bullets (one bullet short of a full clip) and 33rd soldiers know he is down there somewhere.

As the chapter starts, I just sit there, pressed against a car, blood dribbling down Walker's face, waiting for one of the searching soldiers to get close enough for me to take his rifle. One inevitably does, I shoot his head off in disturbing slow-motion, and the rest of the soldiers dive into cover.

I cower behind that car for minutes, exploiting the cheapest moments I can to pick off the soldiers. Either I wait until they are running between cover, reloading, or jumping down from a higher level. Cornered, without the safety of my squad mates, I am being strategic about how I enact violence.

This seems to terrify the 33rd. I hear one of the soldiers cry out in disbelief: "How is this possible?!" They can't believe that *one man* can possibly be killing so many of them. Simply, it shouldn't be possible. I die well over a half dozen times in this skirmish as I slowly learn where the safest spot to cower is without my squad mates to back me up. It's only possible for Walker and I to kill this many of the soldiers because we are in a videogame.

I have heard criticisms that *The Line* is weakened by the same old, fight-countless-enemies-over-and-over gunplay. This might be a fair criticism of shooters generally, but it is an unfair criticism of *The Line* specifically. Yager, the game's developers, were told by publisher 2K that they must make a "squad-based military shooter." Mechanically, the game had to be conventional; Yager had no option but to include countless acts of violence. It isn't disappointing that *The Line* didn't remove the endless killing typical of military shooters; it is commendable that the game subverts the endless killing it had no choice but to include by explicitly acknowledging it. It *shouldn't* be possible for Walker and I to be this unstoppable. But we are, and that terrifies the 33rd. Really, the fear they voice isn't a fear of Walker—it is a fear of the player.

Eventually, Lugo and Adams come to my aid, we mop up the remaining 33rd, and continue on our way.

*

At a locked gate, Lugo and I hold off more 33rd pouring out of the ruined buildings as Adams works to open the gate. As he finally gets it open, Adams claims "What is that fucking smell?!"

When I studied creative writing as part of my undergraduate degree, I was taught that smell is one of the most powerful senses a writer could evoke in her readers. The blandest of smells can trigger emotions and recall memories long buried. Entirely understandably, few games bother evoking smell. It's not a sense that can be easily conveyed through the player's manipulation of a tactile controller or through the colours and sounds of the screen and speakers. Yet, by making allusion to what the characters can smell, simply through their dialog, *The Line* lets the player know that this world does have smells. It's a dimension that the player themselves will never comprehend, but through the characters they know it is there. This is the first of several scenes that the characters allude to a certain smell, and it enriches my intimacy with the following scene.

I jump down into darkness and land standing on a horrific mass grave. So maybe it is the fact that I know these bodies *smell* that I am so shocked by what should be the most non-surprising thing to see in a violent videogame—a pile of bodies.

Maybe it is the indefinite nature of the corpses. There are mountains of them cramped in that room. I can make out bits—an arm, a face, a foot—but I can't make out entire bodies. I can't make out where one *person* ends and the next one begins. It's all just…. meat. Meat and allusions to selves.

Maybe it is the movement. Dead bodies shouldn't move. There should be no movement around them, but bugs and worms crawl all over these bodies, helping along their decomposition into oblivion.

Maybe it's the fact that when we jump down the hole, we don't land on the convenient corpse-less patch of pathway, but halfway down one of the piles of dead. We walk over them, irreverent.

Probably it is all of this that makes this so horrible. These aren't just polygons. These are bodies. The detail. The lack of detail. It's all terrible. I don't want to look, but I keep looking, determined to find the borders of individuals in this lump of rotten meat and shoes. Worse, the game forces me to walk slowly through it while Lt Daniels screams in agony over the radio.

(A thought: I have fallen so low to end up in some metaphoric hell. These bodies are those that I have been killing up to now. I can't help but wonder just how many bodies are down here. More or less than I've killed?)

As we walk around a corner, through the bugs and the bodies, a spotlight draws attention to a row of dead 33rd men, sat upright in chairs with bags over their heads in a clear nod to the atrocities of American soldiers at Abu Ghraib.

The intel tape beside the American bodies is from a 33rd man who has become an interrogator in the new Dubai. He describes how the 33rd interrogators had to undergo every torture technique themselves that they would use on the bodies of their prisoners. "Every insurgent brought before me will know the same pain. And when they break, we will be like brothers. Having stared down death… and flinched." The image accompanying the intel is a switchblade with "honesty" coarsely scratched into the handle.

Perhaps the nod to Abu Ghraib is meant as a kind of balancing. "What we did to you, we will now do to ourselves". The same could go for the broader fighting against Americans in the entire game: It's the West's turn to be at that end of the iron sights in one of these games for once. Of course, however, the West is still at this end, too, along with the player. This isn't a revenge fantasy against the West, but simply a slow realisation helped along by decades of atrocities at our own hands coming to light that we might not be the Good Guys after all. This isn't the West getting what they deserved; this is the West's confidence slowly breaking as we realise we are no better than anyone else, and might actually be a lot worse. This is us flinching.

Overall, though, I'm still at a loss of the meaning of the mass grave at this particular point in the game. Is it a foreboding? Is it to show just how hard life is in post-storm Dubai? Are these all bodies of executed people? Is this the "LIAR'S LAIR" the graffiti alluded to? Or is this simply a grave? I still don't really know, and I struggle to contextualise it in the broader game. Maybe it is truly nothing more than something dumped there for shock-value. Well, it worked.

*

In the next room, we find a badly mutilated body hanging upside-down from the ceiling with a speaker in its open mouth, out of which is coming the transmission Delta have been following. Lt Daniels is already dead, it seems, and the transmission was a trap to lure another CIA agent who is still alive, Agent Gould. But instead Radioman caught Delta.

Walker tries to talk to Radioman over the radio, saying we are here to help. But I've killed too many 33rd for him to believe that, and the 33rd move in to take us out.

Gould appears on a balcony and throws a smoke grenade to cause a distraction and, ultimately, save Delta's lives.

We fight our way out of the building and into the next one, a museum. Walker has decided that now we are with Gould, that he is clearly to be trusted because he saved our lives. So now our allegiances are, again, with the CIA.

Fighting the 33rd's ambush after Gould's smoke grenade, two more mannequins stand in a shop window, again foreshadowing the future hallucination.

In the adjacent museum, after much fighting, an attack helicopter called "Freebird" attacks us through the windows. As I hold down A to sprint, Radioman plays (and hums) the "Dies Irae" of *Messa Da Requiem* at us. According to *Wikipedia*, Dies Irae's lyrics are a poem that "describes the day of judgment, the last trumpets summoning souls before the throne of God, where the saved will be delivered and the unsaved cast into eternal flames." In *The Line* everyone seems to think they are justly casting violence on the unjust when, really, it is that violence preventing them from being just. Again, not unlike the atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

A final rocket from Freebird nearly takes out Adams and collapses the building atop us. Adams's leg is now ripped and bleeding, and Lugo and Walker both look slightly more battered now, too. Adams doesn't want morphine. He wants to "keep his head clear."

The momentary respite granted by the collapsed building allows Delta to take stock of the situation. Adams, again, says we should get out of Dubai and call for evac. Walker says that isn't possible, using the threat of the waiting helicopters as an excuse. Now, Walker says our only chance is with Gould.

Lugo agrees with Walker, claiming that the 33rd are "out of control" and we have to stop them. But are they out of control? The only reason they are fighting us is because we keep fighting them. So far, we have just kept on moving forward into Dubai; all the 33rd have done is try to stop us.

So, again, Walker has chosen another objective, just that bit deeper into Dubai, rather than just turning and walking away.

Adams asks if we really want to "cast our lot" with the CIA. "What choice do we have?" Walker says. And, again, Walker assumes he has no choice. That they can't just leave.

Adams persists, asking, “What about Konrad?” Walker says, “This isn’t about finding Konrad anymore. It’s about doing what’s right.”

Everyone wants to do what’s right, to pass judgment, to force their version of what’s right on others, creating horrific wrongs. Right begets wrong begets someone trying to do right begets violence begets violence begets violence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BATTLE

We exit the rubble into a quiet, serene foyer of an extravagant building. There are statues of what look like diamond giraffes. The walls and floor are glass fish tanks full of water and life. Walking through this bizarre world, Walker talks to Gould on the radio, asks him what is happening here. "Chaos," responds Gould. The CIA apparently came in looking for survivors but instead found Dubai "tearing itself apart."

From the CIA's perspective, then, they are saving Dubai from itself. Gould implies that the people the 33rd were caring for were already rising up and the CIA simply armed them to make it possible. Like everyone else, they are only helping.

Why the CIA *and* Delta have both been sent in is never made entirely clear. Perhaps the CIA hadn't told the army they were going in? At worst, it is a minor plot hole never filled in. It's best not to think about it. It's best to be constantly confused.

Walker asks Gould if Konrad is still alive. Gould doesn't know. On my first game, I think it is obvious that Konrad is still alive. Of course he is. He must be. Why am I killing these people if Konrad isn't still alive? Looking back now, my own presumptions and justifications mirror Walker's eerily closely.

Gould gets cut off by a helicopter attacking his position before more details about just what is going on in Dubai can be revealed. At the same time, an insurgent falls through the glass roof of the building and smashes into the glass floor of the fish tank. His bright red blood on the cracked glass over blue water can't help but make me think of *Bioshock*, as so much of *The Line* does.

So I kindly walk on. We smash a window and walk out (through another hazy dream-wall) onto the sun-scorched sand of Delta's second day in Dubai (the night passed while Delta lingered at the bottom of the city). We are out of the chasm of skyscrapers now and in an area of the city where the skyline is very much visible. The sand walks us out onto a freeway, and we look down to where Gould is leading insurgents against the 33rd, pushing forward.

The attack helicopter is downed by an RPG and takes out a nearby building, blocking the path to Gould in flames, so we will have to walk around the long way, as one tends to do in videogames.

*

Several ropes take us down off the freeway. Opposite the ropes is an old billboard for a ski resort called Snow Dubai. On the billboard is Konrad's face, staring right at me.

The billboards with Konrad's face on them are the subtlest and earliest hints in the game that the world we are experiencing via Walker may not be the actual world at all. As a player, I begin to realise this for certain after the game's later, undeniable hallucinations, but right from the start there are subtle suggestions that the world we are taking at face value is a subjective and skewed perception on things, marred by Walker's own obsession with Konrad. The billboards are so subtle that, I admit, I never noticed them before listening to the *Gamespot* podcast where Walt Williams mentions them. But now, knowing about them paints many other elements of the game in a different light. That STOP sign right at the start of the game. Was that

really there or did Walker warp the game's world with his mind, much as *Driver: San Francisco*'s Tanner warps his own dream-world?[3]

Down the rope, impromptu trenches have been constructed with concrete slabs erected from the sand. Over them is graffiti and street art. "Signs of the revolution," Lugo calls them. "Bullshit, is what it is," responds Adams. "Dubai is dying and everyone is trying to help it along."

Lugo and Adams have split fairly evenly when it comes to Gould. Lugo is very much on Gould's side, sympathetic to an uprising against the 33rd. Adams, on the other hand, thinks Gould is simply exploiting the locals to take out the 33rd and creating a bigger, more violent problem in the process. Kind of like the CIA did in the 80s with Operation Cyclone when they armed Afghan insurgents to fight the Soviets.

Walking through the trenches, three graffiti in particular stand out to me: "We can never go back"; "Under the sand, the pavement" and, the most chilling and telling: "There is not a man righteous. Not a one."

3. I've written further about the subjectivity of worlds via the playable character's perception in an article for *Unwinnable* that you can read at http://www.unwinnable.com/2012/09/25/the-worlds-what-you-make-it/

This final graffiti is lifted from the bible's New Testament's Epistle to the Romans. Specifically, it is the tenth verse of the third chapter of Romans. It is the opening line of a larger (and very pessimistic) section that sharply condemns all the factions fighting in Dubai:

As it is written:
"There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.
All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one."
"Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit."
"The poison of vipers is on their lips."
"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."
"Their feet are swift to shed blood;
ruin and misery mark their ways,
And the way of peace they do not know."
"There is no fear of God before their eyes."[4]

In my undergraduate studies, I remember being told by a film lecturer that it is often easier to figure out what films are about than it is books as, at some point in the movie, a character will more often than not say in so many words exactly the theme of the film. In *The Line*, the theme is painted onto the wall. There is not a man righteous. It's such a matter of fact statement. No man is good. Not even you, Walker. Not even you, player. It's the most simple and cynical of themes, taken right out of *Heart of Darkness*: peel back the thinnest veneer of 'culture' or 'civility' and we're all still just animals. None of us are righteous or special. We just 'are'. Perhaps that is too deterministic for some (for most), but there's a core of truth to it. We humans like to think we are better than other species because we have ethics, because we can consciously decide what is right and wrong. But often, really, these 'intentional' choices are just masks for far simpler, base reactions to

4. Romans 3: 10-18, as written on http://niv.scripturetext.com/romans/3-10.htm

the world around us. Kurtz, Konrad, Walker, most US presidents, myself, and countless other human beings have done great harm—be it actual or virtual—for the supposed cause of doing what is 'right'. This graffiti bible verse, reminds us that whatever reasons Walker has for continuing on into Dubai, doing the right thing is not one of them. Walker, along with everybody still fighting in Dubai, does not truly know what the 'right' thing is. All of them have lost the fear of God. There is not one of them who does good, not even one.

The final graffiti as we leave the winding corridors: "DUBAI DIED SCREAMING". The Dubai that Walker is obsessed with saving is already dead.

*

As we round the corner from this final eulogy, we see the 33rd bodies hung from the streetlights. Two streetlights, branching out from the same pole, with a single body hanging off each over a dead highway. As we walk out further and more of the highway becomes visible, more and more hung corpses come into view, all the way down the highway, stretching off to the skyscrapers in the distance.

It's eerie, those corpses just gently swaying in the wind under the crystal blue sky. Several weeks after I first played *The Line*, I was in a taxi to Melbourne Airport. We drove past a large car park with row after row of very similar streetlights (the single pole splitting into the two lights at the top). As I stared at them through my taxi's window, I realised I was imagining bodies hanging from each and every one of them. Suffice to say, the rows and rows of modern streetlights used as props for such savagery had an effect on me.

It seems like a truly unrealistic number of bodies—especially 33rd bodies. On a later game, back from the raised freeway we stood upon as the helicopter crashed, before we went down into the trenches, I could see these streetlights over the tops of the buildings. From there, not a streetlight has bodies hanging from them. The bodies don't appear until Walker stands directly before them.

2
STUN
60
417

Find a Way Out
3
FRAG
60
417

An intentional but subtle nod to Walker losing his mind? Or simply a technical limitation? Or why not both? This world is, after all, entirely subjective. It's as dependent on Walker's sanity as it is on what the technology running it can put up on my television screen. Hazy transitions between areas and corpses that appear out of nowhere might be due to ghosts in the machine, but Walker himself is a ghost in the machine, just bits of code that my mind is making into a person. He is no more or less real than the hallucinations that might be his, might be my own.

Beneath the hanging corpses, a squad of 33rd troops are trying to get an armoured personnel vehicle to start. The engineer says it is busted, and they instead talk about chopping in down for scrap metal. It's a small, simple scene, but along with the two guards sharing gum and various other scenes later in the game, it adds some humanity to my enemies. Everyone is just trying to survive.

I order Lugo and Adams to open fire on the soldiers on the ground as I drop the engineer.

We fight our way up the road as reinforcements drop down. Beneath the swaying bodies, several street signs have been painted over to say "CITY GATE AHEAD" and "FREE WATER". They go by without comment. Indeed, on my first game, I don't even notice the "FREE WATER" sign, as I am too busy shooting 33rd men. If I had seen it, maybe I would have started to suspect that the 33rd might not just be ruthlessly killing everyone—and then I would have kept shooting them.

We continue fighting down the highway and past a "CITY EVACUATION POINT". An intel item by a sign is a personal recording from the Radioman. The anxiety in his voice contradicts the cocky demeanour he presents to Delta. He is talking about the storms, how the sand rips flesh from bone. He sounds frightened, like a different person. What Walt Williams said on the *Gamespot* podcast about taking apart the characters layer by layer comes back to mind. Radioman and the 33rd are no less human than Delta; their outer layers have just already been stripped back, maybe. What I am listening to in this recording is a past Radioman, one not yet stripped back to his core, one still questioning the situation he finds himself in.

Beyond the evacuation point, down a blocked, inaccessible road, the streetlights with the bodies hung from them continue towards the distant skyscrapers, right to the twin towers where the gate is. The gate, in the next chapter, is where Walker will commit one of his greatest atrocities of the game. Perhaps the 33rd he sees hanging from the streetlights down the road leading to this gate are symbolic of his guilt of the upcoming atrocities plaguing him as he runs these memories that we are playing over again and again in his head?

*

After taking out all the soldiers, we jump down into another narrow trench. The sand is stained red with blood and even 'feels' different through the controller. It feels less grainy, more squelchy. There aren't nearly as many dead here as the previous mass grave, but there are a lot, brushed to the sides against a wall so that a path still exists down the middle. This pile of death is horrific for the same reasons as the previous one: the nondescript flesh and the movement—this time not just of bugs and flies but also the occasional not-quite-dead body groaning in pain among his dead brothers.

They're bodies of insurgents, casualties of the CIA's war against the 33rd.

Adams is horrified that Gould would lead a bunch of armed looters against trained soldiers, but Lugo and Walker defend the CIA.

"Maybe the loss was worth the gain," says Walker—another ironic, self-prophesying statement. In the near future, Walker will be choosing losses that far outweigh any gain, and these choices will sit heavily on his mind. Towards the end of the game, after Walker has lost Lugo and Adams, loading screen messages will ask Walker—ask me—if their loss was worth what has been gained. A scathing question, of course, as Walker gains not a thing for his time in Dubai.

For now, as we walk out of the trench, out of the blood-curdled sand and up onto the paved battlefield we spied from the above freeway, Adams asks, "Do you smell that?" Lugo is incredulous: "We're surrounded by death. Of course I smell it!" Again, smell is evoked. Not just the smell of the dead, but the smell of the imminent white phosphorous attack. Walker looks up as a greenwhite firework explodes and a white mist covered the courtyard and the few insurgents still alive spontaneously ignite.

White phosphorous releases a thick smog of incandescent particles. These particles stick to the flesh and burn deep into the body, causing deep third-degree burns. It is a weapon that was used extensively through the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and is still used in various conflicts today, despite its dubious legal (and ethical) status. White phosphorous doesn't just kill enemy

troops. It burns *everything* it touches, indiscriminately. Throughout the years, it has frequently been deployment on residential and civilian areas to great (that is, terrible) effect. White phosphorous doesn't care who is a good guy and who is a bad guy and who just happens to live there; it just burns.

As the white phosphorous explodes in front of Walker, Adams, and Lugo, time slows down and voices grow faint and echoey like we are in a great chamber. I'm starting to realise that this game is using slow-motion to signal shock, to signal a moment that Walker doesn't want to ever remember but which he takes into his mind in great, careful detail, slowing time down to do so. He can't look away; he can only look more closely at the gratuitous spectacle of death, be they headshots, grenade explosions, or white phosphorous attacks.

We walk through the white smoke as time stays slow, the insurgents screaming and burning and dying around us as greenwhite particles float through the air. I don't know how white phosphorous works in real life. Can you really just walk through the mist mere moments after the explosion? I doubt it, but it works for the scene. Walker moves through the still-burning insurgents like some kind of omniscient ghost, like the Ghost of Christmas Future is showing him what will become of him.

So here, we have juxtaposed the inhumane methods of two different American factions. In one: the corpses of those exploited by the CIA in a foolish war are left to rot in the trenches. In the next: the 33rd use white phosphorous on the same insurgents. It's interesting to note that while these side-by-side scenes are there to make the Americans all look monstrous, it is the nameless locals that die in each case.

The slow motion and the echoing as Walker passes the bodies is almost dreamlike. "This can't be happening" it seems to say.

33rd soldiers are moving in through the mist to mop up. By the time I take cover and fire my first shot, time has sped back up, but sounds are still chambery. It isn't until the battle is almost over that my sound returns to normal. A grenade unsettles the sand and it blends with the white smoke in a disgusting brown blob that just sits in the air.

Afterwards Lugo is distraught. "Why do this? The battle was over?"

"It's a message to the survivors," says Walker. "'Don't fuck with us.'"

"What survivors?" says Adams.

Worth noting is that this wasn't a one-off act by the 33rd. Another graffiti back in the trenches said "Willie Pete was here". Willie Pete is slang for

white phosphorous, commonly used throughout the Vietnam War, and suggests that this is something the 33rd have used in the past to keep control. Ultimately, it is a heinous and unthinkable crime that the 33rd have just committed—and merely a precursor for Delta's and my own crimes that are soon to unfold.

*

Heading on, we walk through another building as, ahead, we can hear that Gould has been taken prisoner, and hostages are being executed before him. A cut scene confirms this, as Gould is interrogated and another local hostage—one of the only women in the entire game, and nothing but a passive victim—is firstly tortured by a machine gun being fired in front of her face before being executed by the commanding officer interrogating Gould.

It's disappointing but far from surprising that the only women throughout the game are helpless, crying, passive refugees. On one hand, you could perhaps argue that *The Line* is about the heart of darkness within mankind, not humankind, but I think that is a poor excuse. In a game that subverts and works against so many conventions, an entirely conventional lack of any real representation of women—without any real commentary on this lack—is incredibly disappointing.

Gould, for his part, looks absolutely devastated, defeated. He knows he is responsible for these civilians dying. Maybe he is even thinking about all the other locals he is responsible for the deaths of. Blood is trickling down his face from the previous battle. His layers have been peeled back and, as Walker will be doing by the end of the game, he is thinking about what he has done. When Gould still refuses to talk, the two remaining civilians are taken off by two soldiers.

Lugo wants to shoot Gould's captives in order to save him. Adams, meanwhile wants to ignore Gould and go save those two civilians.

I am dumbstruck by the realisation I actually have to make a choice. It's a silly, binary, typical videogame choice, but so far I had been comfortable having my choices out of my own hands, being able to blame Walker for whatever went wrong, but here *I* have to decide who lives and who dies.

I decide to save Gould. However, I misheard Lugo's and Adam's voices, and follow Adams, who in fact wanted to save the civilians. We drop down

behind a jeep, Gould and his interrogators in full view. Adams insists we wait until they leave before we move forward. Interestingly, I made the decision of what we would do, but it seems the only decision I really made was who I would follow.

From here, we should have stealthily moved through the area with silencers once Gould was dead. But sitting there behind the jeep, the game forces me to watch the officer murder Gould before we can move on. I couldn't do it. I mark the other men for Lugo and Adams, jump up, and shoot the commander in the head, dropping him.

So starts a massive skirmish, as though I had made the decision to save Gould to start with. It's interesting how the game forces you to really own your decisions, even when those decisions don't make a spot of difference. By forcing me to watch Gould die before I can move on, the game is saying, "Are you sure this is what you want to do?" It makes me see the consequences before the payoff and, sometimes, those consequences are hard to live with. More so, it occasionally gives me a chance to change my mind, such as I did here with Gould. I thought I was resolute in saving the civilians, but I was easily shaken.

But for all our work, Gould still dies. We couldn't save him. The 'choice' that *The Line* had given me was not a choice at all. Or, rather, it was a choice, but it was a choice between things I could *attempt* to do, not between the ways things would necessarily play out. With this most typical setup of a choice in a videogame, *The Line* taught me a hard lesson: intentions alone are not enough.

As we leave the area, we walk past the bodies of the two civilians that had been taken away. Lugo curses, shocked and probably feeling a bit guilty. "What did you think was going to happen to them?" Adams spits back at him, clearly angry we didn't save them. He is speaking to Lugo, not Walker, but it might as well be directed right at me.

The pseudo-choice of who to save was a lesson about how binary choices are not really choices at all. However, it is actually possible to save the civilians—it just takes a lot more effort than simply intending to save them. On my second game I follow Adams again, and I just sit there and watch Gould get murdered and do nothing about it. Doing this (that is, doing nothing) skips the entire skirmish—assuming you don't blow your cover halfway across the area. I follow Adams's footsteps to the back of the area where we find the two

guards arguing over which of them will kill the civilians. Neither of them wants to do it. They want to draw straws, but they have no straws. They want to flip a coin, but they have no coins. Eventually, one decides to flip his service medallion, from the US Army, to decide which of them will kill the civilians. Before they get a chance to carry out the reluctant murder, I murder them.

It's easily missed, this scene. First you have to decide to follow Adams, then you have to not second guess saving Gould, and then you have to not botch the stealthy section. Only then do you see this touching and tragic scene of two soldiers really not wanting to commit murder but having 'no choice.' An honourific medal reduced to a gambling chip in a game of murder.

Doing it this way, Gould still dies before you get to him, but now Lugo is angry because we didn't even try to save him. Whichever choice is made, Walker finds intel on Gould leading Delta to assume the gate is important. So I head on, with a hard lesson learned as to how 'choice' will work in this game.

*

Halfway through a shopping complex, a cut scene plays. Lugo stops. He just stops and says, "This is just fucked."

In so many games, the characters never stop to reflect on what they have done and what has happened to them. It just flows over them like water. In *The Line*, however, it doesn't wash over them; it fills them up, until they are so bloated and heavy from what they have seen and done that they have to burst outwards.

Lugo and Adams end up yelling at each other before Adams punches Lugo in the face. "You think I enjoy watching these people die?!" Adams shouts. "You think I won't carry this shit to my fucking grave?!"

This is one of the earlier hints that our characters are straining under the stress of their experiences, that they aren't going to get through this unchanged. That what happens in Dubai will not stay in Dubai. The scene isn't just superficial lip service. Lugo and Adams aren't *just* upset about what just happened with Gould, but everything that has happened since they first entered Dubai. Mass graves, lunatics with knives, fighting Americans, white phosphorous, watching a CIA agent die. It's all built up to this explosion of violence against each other. Like a premonition of what will become of them if they don't get out of the city.

Walker berates them both, becomes less a friend for a moment and more a commanding officer. "We're in the middle of a warzone and you two start fighting in the dirt like a couple of goddamn kids."

Another ironic statement from Walker because, well, that's exactly what *The Line* is saying war is like. You can pretty it up with drones and military codes of conduct and neat uniforms, but at the end of the day, war is just humans fighting each other in the dirt. Soldiers have to be strong, but only because it takes a strong man to deny what is right in front of them, as Konrad will teach us later. A good soldier, according to *The Line*, is one that doesn't face the truth of what they are doing. The game seems determined to prove that Adams, Lugo, and Walker are not good soldiers.

Which is interesting. Watching and playing their adventure, it is hard by the end of the game not to think of the members of Delta as having always been insane. But what moments like this outburst show is that they are, in fact, among the most sane videogame characters of all time. The insane ones are those that *don't* react to what the player forces them to do.

Adams helps Lugo up (who now has another facial injury to add to his growing repertoire) and on they march.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE GATE

In early 2010, Wikileaks released deeply disturbing footage from a US Apache helicopter that showed the gunship's crew gunning down civilians and a Reuters's journalist in Baghdad. I have seen photos of battlefields before; I have seen planes smash into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre from a hundred different angles; but I have never before watched through the eyes of someone lining up an individual in a crosshair and opening fire. It was gut-wrenching, made only more harrowing by the disconnect in the crew's voice as they seemingly cared not at all for the men they were slaughtering.

Part of me wanted to hate the troops involved—the way they hope the wounded man curled up in the gutter would pick up a weapon so that they can finish him off; the way they chuckle when US ground troops arrive and a tank runs over a body. But I know that this is unfair. Though I have (thankfully) never experienced a conflict situation personally, I imagine that constructing a barrier between "Us" and "Them" is the only way one could handle consistently having to kill fellow humans. The most gut-wrenching aspect of the video, then, is not the behaviour of these individual troops, but the depiction of an environment that fosters and encourages such an irreverent othering of enemy combatants and civilians alike.

Less than a week after watching the leaked video, I started playing *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. The *Call of Duty* games have always tried to stress that wars are not won by any one individual hero, but by thousands of individual men and women (though, the series has failed to depict those women particularly well) who do not fight for 'good' or 'evil' but merely for different sides. The games do this by constantly switching the player's perspective between different characters, collaboratively building up a network of warfare. As an extension of this, the series has tried to depict war as truly horrible, by stressing that the people dying around you are *people* and the people that you are killing are *people*.

It never really works, though, as inevitably the player behaves like they are playing a videogame. The horror of war is that you are killing *people*; however, just as the US troops in the apache seem utterly detached from the men they gun down—rendered as identical, grey silhouettes on the other side of a low-res computer monitor—the enemies running at the player in *Modern Warfare* are not individual men with their own histories and stories but cloned NPCs spawning just off-screen indefinitely until the player passes a certain point. While *Modern Warfare* did a decent job of immersing me in the stories of its characters, it failed to immerse me in their war.

That was until the "Death From Above" mission.

"Death From Above" places the player as a gunner of an AC-130U gunship. As the level begins and I look through the black and white monitor at the ground below, as the gunship's crew chat about who and what to shoot with about as much gravitas as one would recite a grocery list, I can't help but remember the Wikileaks video. I begin to feel sick in the stomach before I even fire the first shell.

Much of *Modern Warfare* doesn't work because it is so detached from the horrors and chaos of war, primarily focused as it is on entertaining. Conversely, "Death From Above" works so well because it is *so explicitly detached* from the war depicted in the rest of the game. At the end of the previous mission, the player is still on the ground as playable character Soap as the gunship enters their airspace. It unleashes a few shells that utterly obliterate a group of Russians and the surrounding buildings just ahead. It is loud, violent, and chaotic.

Then the camera lifts up to the perspective of the gunship. The player becomes detached from what is happening down on the ground, but I still carry the memories of the game up to that point. For the duration of "Death From Above," the player is invincible and never in danger from those you are destroying. In no other mission does your character or his squad mates boast about their actions or mock their enemies, but in the gunship, the crew keep a running commentary on their kills as though racking up points, as though reassuring the player's character that the enemies are nothing more than identical targets on a screen. "Smoke em!" "Niiiice!" "Good kill, good kill" "Yeah! Direct hit right there!" The utter destruction the gunship brings is diluted to the monitor as a dull, monochrome thud. Occasionally it is interjected with the gunfire cackle in the background of Captain Price's

transmissions, further contrasting the calm. Throughout the entire level, a soft drone of something that sounds like an air-conditioner fills the background.

"Death From Above" plays with the detachment that necessarily comes with any videogame's attempt to depict war. You are not really "there," but in many cases neither is reality's modern soldier. When Wikileaks released the video, Julian Assange stated that, "the behaviour of the pilots is like they're playing a video game. It's like they want high scores in that computer game." And he is right. This is not a simplistic "videogames make people violent" statement, but an observation that as videogames try harder and harder to realistically depict war, war is more and more beginning to play out like a videogame. The US Army uses videogames as training simulators and recruiting tools alike. Drone controls are shaped like PlayStation controllers for pilots that have grown up bombing distant villages all their life.

This is what "Death From Above" plays with, and it is how it so successfully and unnervingly depicts how horrible war is—by showing just how distanced we are becoming from those horrors even as our media is becoming so much more intimate with them.[5]

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That above section is a re-worked version of a blog post I wrote after I first played "Death From Above." I went back to read the post before I made the inevitable contrast between "Death From Above" and what occurs in Chapter Eight of *The Line*, but I realised that so much of it is so directly relevant to what *The Line* is trying to achieve that reproducing most of the post in full was worthwhile.

Most interestingly, it is that detached othering I talk about in that post which *The Line* tries to counter. No, 'counter' is the wrong word. *The Line* doesn't counter the othering necessary for conflict so much as consistently draw attention to the fact it is happening. As Walker, I never stop othering my enemies, but I am constantly reminded that I am othering them. All the little moments that humanise the 33rd, the very fact that the 33rd are Americans, exposes the inevitable othering the mind does when faced with

5. Laleh Khalili makes the interesting point that what makes drone attacks so much like playing a videogame is that the operator can see the people they are killing but does not think of them as actual people (http://www.merip.org/liberal-sophistry-about-drones).

the need to commit grave violences. *The Line* pokes at the wound, refusing to let me forget that these are human beings. All of them.

Thematically, Chapter Eight most closely resembles *Modern Warfare*'s "Death From Above" mission, but the purpose it serves is more akin to *Modern Warfare 2*'s "No Russian." It is the turning point of the narrative, the moment that the player/character voluntarily commits an utterly unthinkable act when asked and must live with it for the rest of the game. The plot hinges on this point. Everything up to now was the slow fraying of the typical, generic military shooter distorting into something ugly and dirty, and this is where the rope snaps. The Arabic insurgents made way for American soldiers, screaming in a language I understand. The clean executions have made way for more brutal, intimate affairs. I have made (futile) choices about who will live and who will die. One of my men punched the other in the face. Forget fraying. Things are falling apart.

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"The gate" that Delta assume Gould needed us to capture stands in a bottleneck between twin, giant towers. I am not entirely sure if these towers have real-world counterparts. The closest I found in my research is the Deira Twin Towers, which look similar but not nearly as tall.

We approach the gate from the balcony of a building opposite, where a 33rd guard is looking down over the massive 33rd encampment between here and there. Walker tells Adams to take him out. Adams, who not that long ago was warning us to look out for "guys like that" who run at you with a knife, pulls out his own knife and slits the throat of the guard.

As Adams approaches his prey in a cut scene, we can see the blood and dirt and sweat covering him, the pressures that events thus far have put on his bodies, the layers that have been peeled back. Most shocking is when he mutters, "Sweet dreams, bitch." to the dead soldier. It feels like my characters have started to become something ugly without my noticing, right in front of my eyes.

Doing recon, Lugo notes that we will never get through the army between us and the gate. Adams notes a mortar nearby, and Walker decides to use it to take out the camp. But Lugo protests, noting that it is white phosphorous. As typical by now, Walker insists that we don't have a choice.

"There's always a choice!" Lugo insists. But Walker disagrees: "No, there's really not."

And, in a practical sense, Walker is right. There truly is no choice. If you try to defeat the 33rd with conventional weapons, snipers appear on the rooftops and quickly take you out. Neither can you actually get down from the balcony without launching the white phosphorous. Within the game, there is no way to advance but to use the mortar—and what is there to do if not advance? But still, many players got angry that the game apparently alludes to a choice without offering one. Of course, the *real* choice Walker has is to turn around and leave Dubai, and the real choice the player has is to not play a military shooter that asks you to drop white phosphorous on people. So, really, Lugo and Walker are both right. Walker, like a truly post-*Bioshock* playable character is right that sometimes there is no choice and you just have to kindly do what you are told. But Dubai, unlike Rapture, is not on the bottom of the ocean. Walker *is* choosing to be in a situation where he has no choice, and so am I. *The Line* doesn't really want players to stop playing at this point. It simply wants us to accept responsibility for the situations we allow ourselves to be in.

Adams and Lugo reluctantly set up the mortar while Walker readies the aiming computer.

"Prepare to fire?" Walker says.

"Is that an order, *sir*?" Lugo spits, clearly not impressed.

"Yes. It is."

Adams fires the camera; it flies up into the air and releases a parachute so that the camera I am targeting with hovers above the battlefield, slowly descending with the wind.

The soldiers see this, of course, and open fire on our position even as the camera's perspective crawls up over Walkers shoulder and focuses on the screen of the targeting monitor. For a moment, I can see the outline of Walker's reflection, but it quickly fades away, leaving nothing but the black and white blurs of the screen.

The fading out reflection creates a detachment. It says, "Hey. This isn't really you. These aren't really people. They are just targets on a screen that a computer is responsible for. You have no role in this." It creates the distance and othering that modern war relies on in order to allow heinous acts to be committed. I'm not here. This isn't happening.

I fire the first mortar onto some soldiers and entire sections of the monitor are engulfed with white. On one level, I know what is going on. I can hear it. Over the top of and beyond the monitor, I can *hear* the screaming of the soldiers. I can't see it, but I know they are on the ground, in flames, the clothes and flesh burning from their bodies. I remember the scene I just walked through not that long ago. But I can't 'see' it; I can't see 'me'. I'm detached from my actions by a technological mediator distancing me from the battlefield. This isn't me. I'm not here.

I fire mortar after mortar, taking out men, RPGs, and APCs.

One last APC is right at the back of the camp and, through the heat-sensitive camera, I can make out a large number of other people on the far side of a wall. Some people have claimed that these people were "obviously" civilians and, on later plays, I can see that now. On my first game, I sincerely thought they were soldiers trying to hide from the white phosphorous. Regardless, there was a red square over the APC, marking it as a target I had to take out, so I fired. On the monitor, the white pixels that were the phosphorous funneled into the room with the people. I could clearly hear their screaming.

I'm not sure when my (Walker's) reflection became visible again on the monitor. I think it was a subtle, slow fading in as the screen turned whiter from the phosphorous. As the final group of (what I thought were) soldiers collapsed screaming, I wasn't looking at them; I was looking through them back at myself. I was looking at Walker reflected on the aiming computer but I may have well been looking at me, in my lounge room, reflected back off my television set. It may as well have been the reflection of some person in an American airbase looking back at and through themselves as they flew a drone over an Afghan wedding. A reflection of an Apache gunner on a video reel that would eventually find its way onto a Wikileaks website. It says, "No. You cannot blame the technology for this. This is you. You are here. You are doing this. This is happening."

The scene is so chilling not because of the crime I've committed, but because the game forced me to acknowledge that I committed them. It slaps my face right there on top of the crime.

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"No one's moving. It's over," says Lugo.

"Okay. We're done," says Walker to his own reflection. We're done.

And he is right. They are done. In this act, Walker, Adams, and Lugo have lost something that they will never get back. Something that was still just hanging on after everything that had happened so far has been shaken free.

In the *Gamespot* podcast, Walt Williams notes that Chapter Eight is about the moment you stop seeing your enemies as human and, further, that 'the line' alluded to in the game's title is meant not so much to suggest a line crossed, but a line between expectations and reality that gets blurred. As Walker looks up from the targeting computer and the reality of what I have done takes shape before me, I realise what happens when that line is blurred, when it is crossed: atrocities.

We take a rope down to the road and walk forward. Everything is black and covered in greenwhite particles and smoke. There are bodies everywhere. There is screaming. Charcoal-black 33rd soldiers are crawling among the wreckage without legs. On later games I would shoot them and put them out of their misery. My first time, I just walk past them, absolutely dumbfounded that *I did this*. I didn't have a choice, but that doesn't matter. I

did this. There's no way I can deny it. I saw my face reflected in the targeting monitor. Somehow, I voluntarily did this.

J.G. Ballard once said of his novel *Crash*, "I want to rub the human face in its own vomit and force it to look in the mirror." As Group Editor of *PC Powerplay* and *Hyper* magazines David Wildgoose pointed out to me after I played this scene, this is exactly what *The Line* is trying to do. Not just to Walker, but to the player. It says to the player: *this is what you do when you play a military shooter.* The trap the game has laid across seven rigidly generic chapters has been snared. I walked right into it and revealed that I was always the monster the game knew I was, and now the game is going to make me accept it. As the AC-130U gunner of *Modern Warfare*, I never had to see what I wrought, but *The Line* forces me to walk right through the carnage I have unleashed. It gives me the safety and the absolving distance of a targeting computer then rips it away again, rubbing my face in what I have done.

"This. This was too much," whispers Lugo.

It's a superbly affecting and utterly terrible scene, accentuated through articulate audiovisual design (much like the previous mass graves) that make the smoldering ruins absolutely miserable to see.

On the far side, we find a 33rd officer on his back. His face is burnt off, and

he is on the edge of death. All he can say is "Why?" over and over.

"You brought this on yourself," says Walker, already building up a mental wall in place of the computer screen that has been torn away from him.

"We were trying to help," the soldier says, and dies.

Walker sounds surprised and walks on to look in a nearby building. I wonder if Walker already suspects what he will see, if he realises what he actually saw on the monitor and knows exactly where to go. After all, the players that knew they were indeed civilians still fired on them for the sake of progressing the game. Why wouldn't Walker?

30 to 40 civilians, burnt to death by white phosphorous. The 30 to 40 civilians the 33rd took from the refugee camp back in Chapter Four. What were they doing with them? I still don't really know. Maybe they were going to kill them because Dubai could not handle that many people. More probable, they were taking them behind the gate to protect them, and the refugees left at the mall were angry at us for scaring the 33rd off. It doesn't really matter anymore. The point is *we* killed them. We killed the civilians, and we killed the 33rd who, one way or the other, were trying to help.

In a cut scene, Lugo snaps and starts screaming, blaming Walker for making them all murderers. Meanwhile, Walker just looks at two corpses, a woman trying futilely to protect her child from the incandescent particles with her hand. Like the female hostage executed in front of Gould, this woman is used in a problematic, gendered way. The nurturing woman is the starkest contrast to our common, masculine understandings of war. Yet, the symbolism is no less powerful for being cheap.

Very little is said in the scene, but the message is magnificently and terribly clear: Lugo is getting his anger out, but Walker is pushing his down, deeper into himself until it becomes a fundamental and irrevocable part of him. He looks at the woman and her child, processing what he sees and making it part of himself, scorching it into his memory. He is like a computer: "Processing…" He closes his eyes briefly, opens them again, and tells his men to keep moving.

Adams and Lugo are obviously shocked by Walker's apparent lack of emotion, his apparent lack of empathy. But I've seen the cut scene, I saw him take it in. At the end of "Death From Above" and "No Russian" alike, I bid farewell to a playable character I never had to see again. I committed their crimes, forgot their crimes, and moved on. Here, I am stuck with Walker,

and he is stuck with what he has done. He hasn't disregarded anything. On the contrary, he is taking everything along with him. And, like some anthropomorphised emotional baggage, I have to take Walker along with me.

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We continue on towards the gate, walking towards cover at the bottom of one of the towers that is clearly for a battle. It is the same generic military shooting that was happening before we became monsters, but everything is different. The first 33rd soldiers we encounter shout "MURDERERS!" at us. They want revenge, justifiably so. *They* are trashtalking *us*, and we deserve it.

More so, Walker's voice has changed. I shoot a man dead and he shouts, "Got the fucker!" I kill another and he shouts, "And stay down!" He isn't removing targets now; he is killing people. More so, on the brink of insanity, Walker is acting more and more like any typical shooter protagonist—most specifically the trashtalking Gears of *Gears of War*. Paradoxically, perhaps, Walker is both reveling in his violent acts *as violent acts* while also dehumanising his enemies in order to revel at all. He has redirected his own guilt onto the 33rd, and now he wants to kill all of them for what they did—that is, what Walker feels they made him do. So the misguided violence continues as Walker, still not walking away, wants to kill the 33rd for a crime that he himself committed.

We enter the building and continue to fight through the foyer. The inside of the building is hollow; looking up, interior balconies stretch up alongside an empty void. Back on the ground, in the middle of the foyer on the low roof of a booth, a stone angel lies splayed on its back. Looking up after the skirmish is over, I notice that three other angel statues are suspended from the far-above ceiling as though flying in a spiral towards the sky. It is the highest one that has apparently snapped from its chains and fallen back to earth, dead. It's hard not to read it is an Icarus analogy, the boy so excited by his new wings that he flew too high, melted them, and fell back to earth. Walker refused to stop walking into Dubai, and now he has fallen beyond any chance of salvation. Like the stone angel splayed out dead, Walker has fallen. Or perhaps, like Icarus, he was never an angel in the first place. Not a man is righteous, after all.

Walker is desperate to find something significant here, but Adams and Lugo note that it is just another base, that the crimes they committed outside were for naught. Indeed, while looking for just why this base is special, I find several monitors in a corner, on which blurry surveillance camera footage plays of the container full of civilian husks. The only things here are my crimes, lingering on.

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Upstairs, we find Konrad's most trusted men, his command team, dead and decayed, burnt to a crisp with white phosphorous. It is here that Walker first starts hearing Konrad's voice. He finds a walkie-talkie on a pedestal beside the bodies, from which he thinks Konrad's voice is coming from, and asks Konrad what is happening here.

Konrad responds, "Survival. Plain and simple. Everything here is teetering on the edge of everything."

Of course, Walker isn't actually talking to Konrad. Konrad is dead, as we discover at the end of the game. Noticeably, it isn't until the incident at the gate that Walker both decides Konrad is to blame for Walker's crime and that he is definitely alive. Walker simply cannot live with what he did and immediately constructs Konrad to take the blame instead.

"Welcome to Dubai, gentlemen," says Konrad, alluding to one of the first things Walker says to his own men at the start of the game. It's one of many overlaps between the two men.

A window opens up on the side of the skyscraper, showing the ruins of Dubai stretching off beyond a highway. Walker and his men are meant to abseil down to continue their adventure, or so Konrad says.

It's like *déjà vu*. The game started with the line "Welcome to Dubai" and a road to walk down, and now we are doing that again. Except this time, at least for me as the player, with a bit more humility and honesty. I have been slapped awake, shown guilty of my virtual crimes. The first eight chapters worked to lure me into admitting through Walker's actions that this is what I do in military shooters and now that I have admitted it, we are going to do it again with a bit more clarity, a bit more transparency. You enjoy this. Admit it.

One mission objective appears on the screen as the next chapter starts: obey.

CHAPTER NINE

THE ROAD

Walker clips the walkie-talkie he thinks he can hear Konrad through to his backpack. Many videogames have a character who acts as a voice in the player's ear, telling them what to do. It's this trope that *Bioshock* exploits with Atlas's polite voice to disguise brain-conditioning with modest requests. In *The Line*, the Atlas figure (in this case, Konrad) is shown to be a figment of our imagination, an excuse we create for ourselves to justify our own actions. Konrad isn't really talking to Walker through the walkie-talkie, but Walker needs to believe he is. He needs to believe someone else is responsible not just for what he has already done, but for what he will continue to do. And so, the very fabrication of that voice sits on the screen in plain view for the rest of the game, right there between Walker's body and mine. His own consciousness sitting on his shoulder, whispering in our ears.

The events of this ninth chapter, right after the events of the gate, set up Konrad as a typically psychopathic madman. He talks to us like he can see everything we do. He sets up elaborate choices and traps for us. As a player, I just accept it. Of course Konrad is the bad guy. Of course he is mad. On my first game, I never stop to think that perhaps this madman's voice making me do these things that, really, I do in every game, is something I am imagining, something both Walker and I conjure to deny our own complicity in our crimes. I accept that Konrad is alive and that he is the bad guy. It's just easier.

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As we abseil out of the building down to the road, doing as Konrad's voice orders us, there is a reflection in the building's window beside Walker's. I can only see it briefly and on my first game, like a *Dear Esther* ghost, I wonder if I saw it at all. It's a reflection of a body, hung from its wrists. Judging by the reflection, the body should be right beside Walker's rope, but looking back up once I am on the ground, nothing is there.

I assumed I was imaging things, or that the body actually was hanging there, somewhere, just out of the camera's sight. But I've played this section over and over, and I can find no body to connect to the reflected, blurry haze of a woman's strung up body. It's a reflection without a real-world counterpart. Looking ever closer at the body (on a later game I reloaded and looked at it over and over again) I suspect this reflection is of the dead woman that Walker has locked in his memory, the one who tried to protect her child from my white phosphorous attack.

I'm not sure exactly what it means. Of course, just down the road, I will come to the 'choice' Konrad has set up for me, where he expects me to kill one of two men to see justice done. Maybe the body-less reflection is just a foreboding of the prisoners Walker will soon conjure in his mind. Maybe it is just another subtle suggestion, just like Konrad's face on the billboards, that Walker's reality can't be trusted, that it is haunted with the specters of his conscience. Maybe it

is an analogy for things that happen on the glass of our television screens with, we like to believe, no real-world counterpart or consequence.

As Delta walk towards the highway, we approach two people hanging from a crossbeam as the screen fades to white. In the *Gamespot* podcast, Walt Williams notes that if the game fades out to white instead of black, it suggests Walker is hallucinating. However, I'm not quite sure I am completely convinced by that statement, as the game faded to white immediately before we covered the 33rd camp at the gate in white phosphorous (unless that was 'really' a double-take by Walker's mind to push those events into unreality). Conversely, is this something I can really disagree with the game's writer over? Regardless, we know from the end of the game that the following scene is indeed happening, in part, in Walker's head.

As the cut scene begins, several crows fly away from the crossbeam the bodies are hung from. In another game I have spent much time with this year, *Driver: San Francisco*, reality is broken down and toyed with much like in *The Line*—with the key difference being that in *Driver SF* the player is aware from the very start that nothing is real. In *Driver SF*, crows symbolise key things in Tanner's dream: billboards he makes up, places he needs to go, vehicles he needs to follow. The crows hanging around these prisoner/corpses made me think of *Driver SF* even on my first game, before I knew *The Line*'s events are (at least in part) dreamlike. Just as in *Driver: SF*, crows regularly appear in *The Line* to highlight things that aren't quite right. Except, unlike in *Driver: SF*, the crows are never explicitly flagged. They are just there. This goes right back to the very start of the game. As Walker stepped past that very first STOP sign, several crows took flight from beneath it.

The setup is this: two living men are hanging from the street sign, each covered in the lasers of snipers up on the dunes. One is a refugee who tried to steal water. The other is a 33rd soldier who was sent to apprehend the water thief and ended up murdering the man's whole family in the process. Ultimately, Konrad explains, people are dead because these two "animals" could not control themselves. He wants Walker to decide which man deserves to die.

It's ironic that Walker, a man causing death because he is unable to control/restrain himself has to judge men for causing death because they could not control themselves. We also get an insight into Konrad's near-sighted ideology here, too (well, as much as we can learn about a dead man,

anyway). He thinks these men are 'animals' for not being able to control themselves. He believed that humans were better than that, that he could create a sustainable society out of Dubai's ruins. But all he has proven is that men are, really, just animals. That in a harsh enough situation, 'control' has nothing to do with it. We act like animals, because that is what we are.

On my first game I shoot the soldier (stealing water is understandable, I rationed; murder is not). In Walker's ear, Konrad seemed both impressed and surprised that I have apparently made the 'right' decision. On my second game, I take cover behind a large street sign wedged into the sand and shoot at the snipers—but not before the snipers killed both prisoners. Konrad is disappointed at my disobedience and denial. On my third game, I take out the water thief, and Konrad seemed surprised at my ruthlessness.

With the retrospective knowledge that Konrad's voice is really just in Walker's head, Konrad's reaction to these decisions might make more sense. At least, his impressed reaction of me killing the 33rd soldier does. At this stage, just past the gate, Walker needs to feel justified in his slaughter of the 33rd soldiers; he needs to feel that they are, in fact, evil and worthy of no tolerance. Konrad congratulating my choice to kill the 33rd soldier is Walker's way of assuring himself that he is righteous in his vendetta.

Moving ahead, we continue to fight the 33rd, regardless of what choice we made (or in fact didn't actually make) with the prisoners. We fight down the road, much like we did at the start of the game, until a sandstorm hits to help us out.

I've not yet mentioned how sandstorms affect the gameplay. You cannot give orders to Adams and Lugo, and guns are far less accurate. Fighting in a storm becomes even dirtier and more frantic than typical fights. Entire clips are sprayed just to hit a couple of soldiers.

Eventually we fight through the storm to a large pipe where we can wait it out. This is the first moment of rest the squad has had since the crimes we committed at the gate. Walker pulls out the walkie-talkie and says to Konrad: "This war is over, Colonel. And you *will* be relieved of your command." He is angry with Konrad. The events of this chapter—those real and those imagined—have convinced Walker (have convinced me) that Konrad is the real monster here. Konrad's voice was exactly what Walker needed to hear in order to feel like the gate was not his fault. And, looking back at it now, it was exactly what I needed to hear, too.

CHAPTER TEN

RIGGS

The storm gives the game a chance to jump ahead in time, moving forward to Delta's second night in Dubai.

Adams insists we have to talk about what happened "back there." It's unclear if he is alluding to what Walker did with the two hanging men—the two hanging corpses—or the white phosphorous attack on the gate. Regardless, Walker refuses to engage with the conversation.

"We aren't leaving until the survivors can be evacuated," says Walker. "You gotta trust me on this."

And so, the goalposts are moved once again as Walker again reinterprets Delta's objectives in a way that allows him to venture deeper into Dubai.

"I trust you, Walker," says Adams. "I just don't agree with you."

Through the way Walker continually shifts his objectives, *The Line* says something about how we define choices. Each time Walker insists that he 'has no choice', he is in fact refusing to acknowledge the choices he has already made. He *chooses* willful ignorance simply because it is easier—as we all do regularly. Through Walker, the game shows us the choices we refuse to make in our own lives—or perhaps more accurately, the choices we make even while claiming we have no choice but to make them. The point of Walker's generic name and his Nolan North voice is to stress that he *isn't* special. He is an everyman. He is you. His blatant denial of his situation, the way he makes things worse by refusing to just open his eyes, is not a unique character trait. Konrad did it. The CIA did it. Most importantly, Adams and Lugo are both doing it. Adams deciding to 'trust' Walker even when he doesn't agree with him is just one succinct moment where this fallacy of all men becomes visible in Adams. It's a key moment that highlights that there is nothing special about what is happening to Walker.

There's not a man righteous.

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We decide Konrad must be in the tallest tower in the city, the Burj Khalifa, and that is how he must be able to keep an eye on Delta. As we move forward, we intercept a radio message from Riggs, the final CIA agent still alive in Dubai. His insurgents are being overrun by the 33rd, and we move to assist.

As we begin fighting the 33rd, I perform an execution on a soldier to gather ammo for my rifle. Walker shoots the man in the kneecap, waits a breath, then shoots him in the head. It's unnerving, to say the least. Punching a man in the face to kill him was desperation. Shooting a troop in the head to kill him was cold-hearted efficiency. This relishing in the man's agony is just… wrong.

We fight our way to Riggs, a hardened old man who plans to force the 33rd's hand by stealing from them the last of Dubai's water—and with it, their power over the city.

As we follow Riggs towards the Aquarium Coliseum where the water is being held, Adams and Lugo have a go at Riggs for starting this war.

Riggs justifies his actions: "These people were ready to rise up. We just gave them the tools."

"Tools to get them killed," rebuts Walker.

Riggs chuckles. "You keep telling yourself that, kid."

Riggs apparently sees right through Walker's facade. He knows Walker is just trying to shift blame away from himself. Walker isn't a murderer for killing the insurgents earlier in the game; Riggs is for giving those insurgents weapons in the first place. Later, just before Riggs's death, Walker tells him he is insane. Perhaps Riggs is just the only one capable of seeing how things really are. Perhaps that means Riggs truly is insane. After all, a strong man denies what is right in front of him.

Riggs is using the locals as a distraction, attacking the aquarium head on in a suicide attack while Lugo, Adams, and Walker sneak in the back.

There is little to note of the skirmishes on our way to the aquarium. At one point we move through a parking lot (in what is a particularly frustrating battle on the harder difficulties), and I note that the parking lot we move through is Red C4. It could just be a coincidence that the parking lot is designated the name of an explosive, or perhaps it's another obsession of Walker's mind conjuring the world for us.

As we walk up the back of the aquarium, Konrad speaks to Walker again. He warns Walker that Riggs will destroy the water, that everyone including Walker's men will die from thirst. Walker ignores him, of course. During my

first game, this bothered me. If Konrad knew I was coming in the back, why didn't he move his men to stop me? Of course, now I know it is because Konrad was never actually in charge. Instead, Konrad's voice was Walker's subconscious telling Walker that Riggs would destroy the water. But if Walker knew this, why would he do it? Because he was refusing to acknowledge the reality of the situation? Or is the whole game just Walker reliving the events over and over, and he already knows how this is going to play out but is unable to prevent it? The later *déjà vu* moment supports that reading, but I will get to that later.

Inside the aquarium, we stealthily take out the few guards until a point comes when we are inevitably spotted. The moment we are, the song "Glasgow Mega-Snake" by Mogwai begins playing. I can't think of any specific significance this song adds to the scene (there are no lyrics to decipher here) other than a loud, somewhat discordant backing track to the fighting. In fact, it is almost more 'generic' shooter music than any the game has yet used, but still with that slightly off-putting tone saying "this is not okay". It isn't epic so much as oppressive.

I do another execution. This time, Walker kneels on the man and murders the man with a series of brutal punches. He spits "Fucking traitor" as he stands back up.

Most bizarrely about the entire aquarium scene is that all the water is in trucks, waiting for us. One would imagine that if the water is being held at the aquarium, it is because it is in all the giant fish tanks. But, no, it is just sitting in trucks, waiting for us to steal it, apparently.

We kill the last of the 33rd and approach the trucks. Riggs arrives with his men. "We're about to bring this city to its knees," he says, handing me a grenade launcher and climbing into the first truck.

"Want me to shoot him or will you?" asks Adams.

"If we get out of this alive, he is all yours," says Walker. Later, when I am standing over Riggs's body deciding whether or not I will give him the mercy of shooting him, I remember this conversation and how Walker's tongue always seems to be cursed and prophetic at the same time.

Lugo and Adams each jump on a truck, leaving Walker alone to once again hear Konrad's voice. "There will be a price for this, Walker. I hope you are prepared to pay it."

With that, Walker jumps onto the side of the last truck out of the aquarium.

*

Chapter Ten is the only chapter of the game with a "Part Two." Part Two is called "Stealing Water." As the trucks drive out the aquarium, refugees are on the side of the road. Some run up and beg for water. Others throw stones at us, angrily. The point is blunt: we aren't just causing the 33rd to suffer by doing this; we are causing everyone to suffer. We are sabotaging what semblance of a functioning society the 33rd have managed to hold on to. We are *stealing*.

The segment sees me with an infinite number of grenades, hanging off the side of a truck, pulverising 33rd troops, helicopters, and humvees as we make our escape. It's a ridiculous, bombastic, videogame-y stage that contrasts starkly with the first half of the game that just saw Delta marching steadily forward. How did we go from trained, efficient Delta operatives to men hanging off trucks lobbing grenades at people? When did that change happen? The answer, of course, is with every single step forward that we took.

As we proceed, bullet holes pocket the trucks and water starts leaking out everywhere, spilling into the sand as if to point out the whole stupid futility of this endeavour.

Eventually, the trucks are cornered and Riggs decides to crash them, choosing to destroy the water rather than give it back. Clearly his men are loyal to him as, somehow, he manages to crush all three trucks into the side of a building in a fiery explosion.

"I told you there would be a price for this," comes Konrad's voice as the trucks explode and Walker is covered in rubble.

In a cut scene from Walker's point-of-view, I wake up, my vision blurred. Konrad is standing in front of me, looking down at me. He says, "In four days this city will begin dying from thirst. Just like Riggs wanted. This is your fault, Walker. You did this. Not me."

Perhaps this moment of near-death is a moment of clarity for Walker. He is able to actually admit to himself that this is his own fault, not Konrad's. All Walker did was follow Rigg's orders, but the responsibility is still on Walker. Yet, accept it as Walker may, he still needs to construct Konrad in order to say it to him.

But Konrad walks away, and Walker stands back up. This isn't over yet. Walker is still denying what is right in front of him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ALONE

While *The Line*'s major plot point happened back in Chapter Eight, it is from Chapter Eleven onwards that the game really starts to unfurl. The events between the white phosphorous attack on the gate and the destruction of the water at the aquarium are not, in retrospect, much more interesting than the events leading up to the gate. Helping Riggs steal the water was perhaps the most forgettable part of the game. Partially because it seemed obvious to me that Riggs would destroy it, and partially because it made no sense that the 33rd were storing water in trucks in the first place. Unless, I guess, they were routinely transporting it to the different refugee camps under their protection.

What these levels did do, though, was allow a kind of second act for Walker's character development. After his crimes at the gate, Walker has started to break down, as we have already seen. Breaking, but not quite broken yet. Through chapters Nine and Ten, he was perhaps in some kind of denial. "Well, I screwed up at the gate, that doesn't mean I'm a bad man, does it?" He conjured Konrad's voice specifically for this reason.

But then he is complicit in destroying the water and, potentially, ending far more innocent lives than he did at the gate. This is the second major moment in Walker's downward spiral. The second major layer that is peeled back from his grasp on reality. The gate wasn't a one off incident—everything he does in Dubai hurts even more people.

Once again, as the layers are pulled back, so is Walker's flesh. He pulls himself out of the rubble of the burning trucks, even more beaten up. His sleeves are entirely torn off, revealing bulging biceps like a washed-up *Gears of War 3* psychopath. A gaping wound in the back of his head is streaming blood down his neck. Half his face is covers in gashes and bruises.

Moving Walker forward, he moves at a slow limp through the burning buildings, alongside a flipped water truck. Over the radio, a somewhat unsettled Radioman is telling Dubai that the water is gone, that martial law is now in effect, that somehow everything will be fine. Around the bend of the truck, a second truck is on its side, leaking water from dozens of bullet holes. Refugees are surrounding it, filling buckets and jars and any container they can find with the leaking water. They don't believe the Radioman. They are looking after themselves.

The refugees are a nice touch, adding an extra layer to Walker's and my guilt. We didn't just destroy water; we have probably destroyed lives. This was our fault.

To drive the message home, one of the refugees sees Walker limping forwards, and stands to block his road. He points and yell, "Get the fuck out of here. You did this." I get too close to him, and he pushes me back. No shooting or violence, just an angry push. It almost annoys me that he won't be violent. In his situation, I would be. Walker would be. Why won't he?

I walk around him, but he continues to shout after me. "That's right, keep walking. Fucking Americans."

He doesn't blame 'Delta' or 'The 33rd' or 'the CIA', just Americans. We see the insurgents and refugees as all generic Arabic people, and they in turn see us all as Americans. But in this context, can you blame him? Every group of Americans in Dubai has only fucked things up further

while telling themselves they were helping. It's a magnificent, zoomed in, personal commentary on American (and Western) interventionism. This man who will soon die of thirst doesn't care why I'm here or what I am trying to do, just that I have made things even worse for the people who live here with my violence. Just like America has done in Cuba, South America, Afghanistan, Iraq. But not just in real-life. *The Line* condemningly contrasts the true consequences of our interventionism with how America (and the West in general) is typically depicted to us Westerners in our own media. How often we have taken control of the body of an able white American man, marched into a Middle-Eastern/Asian/African/South American town and Made Things Better from our own lounge room through videogames! Interventionism isn't a simple solution. Shit happens. People are hurt and killed by our actions. Nothing is ever so simple.

Fucking Americans.

This theme is continued when I find Riggs pinned under the forward-most truck. He justifies destroying the water, noting that the CIA were here trying to bury everything that had happened to, ultimately, protect America. "If people find out what he [Konrad] did, the whole region will declare war on us. And we'll lose," says Riggs.

The CIA were never here to save anyone; they were here to make it go away. They were here to save face for the United States of America by hiding what Konrad and the 33rd has done. What's interesting though is that last detail: "And we'll lose." This wasn't an act of a cocky superpower controlling the world's perception of it (as American foreign policy often does), but an act of desperation by an empire with a crippled sense of self-worth. The CIA knows they will lose that war. They are burying Dubai because they are terrified. Ashamed, even.

Walker tells Riggs he is insane. Riggs laughs, saying Gould said exactly the same thing. For my part, I think Riggs is both the most insane character in *The Line*, and the one who most clearly understands what is going on. Maybe the two go hand in hand. Maybe you have to be insane to understand what is going on here.

Riggs, pinned under the burning truck, has one last request. He hands Walker his revolver with a single bullet, and asks me to shoot him. "Don't let me burn," he pleads.

On my first game, I shoot him without hesitation. On my second game, I plan to walk away and just let him burn. But then, as it dawns on Riggs that I am not going to shoot him, he starts to scream. And beg. And cry. It wasn't death that scared him; it was pain. Instead of walking away, I find myself just standing there and looking at him, watching the fire engulf him. I then used the extra bullet to kill a nearby grazing Oryx for the "Deer Hunter" achievement.

Hearing Riggs scream like that is unnerving. Every time I think I get what tropes *The Line* is placing in front of me (in this case, the hard, honourable-to-a-fault US patriot), it deliberately exploits those expectations. I think I know Riggs, and then he cries and begs for me to kill him so he won't burn. Like everyone, Riggs is really just a human with his own layers—the fire just peeled them back quicker and we saw all the layers at once. In terms of making all the characters seem human, it does a terrifyingly good job.

It's interesting to see how the game's binary choices have evolved over the course of the game, too. Closer to the beginning of the game, with the soldier that killed Agent Kastavin, it was a choice between life and death—either kill the soldier or let him live (and kill him later). Later, with Agent Gould, it was a choice between life for one and death for the others, or death for one and life for the others (but actually death for both). This second decision complicated things but was still ultimately a life/death choice. Now, with Riggs, there is no life/death choice. The choice is between Riggs dying painfully and Riggs being murdered painlessly. The binary choices offered to me, the player, reflects Walker's own comprehension of his situation. When he was still deluded and thinking he could 'help' people, the choices seemed much simpler. The choices that the game chooses to focus on as Actual Decisions become increasingly pessimistic as Walker's mental state declines.

Beyond Riggs body, I can still only walk Walker slowly as he limps through the sand, past bodies of 33rd soldiers strewn across the sand. It gives a sense of continuity to which Riggs's death was just an interlude. I stood up from the wreckage and started walking. Riggs died, and then I just kept walking.

Around the next bend, Adams picks me up on the radio, surprised that I am still alive.

"I got lucky," says Walker.

"And Riggs?" asks Adams.

"Dead."

"Good."

It harks back to the last discussion Walker and Adams had before getting on the trucks in the aquarium, almost as though they are becoming aware of just how ironically prophetic everything they are saying tends to be.

But Walker is still angry at Riggs: "He fucked us. He fucked everybody." He says it without any self-blame at all. Again, it is always someone else's fault. Walker was just trying to help.

*

Walking further from the wreckage, Radioman interrupts Walker's conversation with Adams. This is, I think, the first time we hear Radioman address Delta since Walker started communicating with Konrad. Ever since Konrad's voice emerged on my first game, I confused all later utterances of the Radioman with Konrad. This, I think, led to me being more surprised by the game's ending: I thought Lugo and Adams had heard Konrad speaking throughout the game, too. But, in fact, on my second game when I could tell the difference between Konrad's and Radioman's voices, it was clear that only Walker ever hears Konrad speak. When Konrad speaks, only Walker responds to it. Still, that confused me on my first game, but probably for my benefit.

Radioman starts berating me for destroying the water. Walker responds with a "Fuck you!" and Radioman says, "Whoa! Language! After all, this is an E-rated program. For EVERYBODY'S THIRSTY!" A little crass and worthy of an eye-roll, perhaps, but it's not the only time Radioman pricks at the fourth wall. I think the Radioman's jabs directed right at the player—later at videogame violence, this time at videogame classification—most bluntly situate the game as not just another critique of war or the human condition or Western interventionism (all of which it does commendably), but a critique of shooters themselves *in relation to* critiques of war, the human condition, and Western interventionism.

Up ahead is a shopping mall, and as I cross the parking lot, a helicopter drops 33rd troops who run into it as Lugo comes back on the radio, shouting that they are surrounded. Also of note as Walker gets away from the wreckage is that it is daytime again, Delta's third day in Dubai.

As I head into the mall, Radioman starts singing (poorly) a version of Inner Circle's "Bad Boys", singing "Whatcha gonna do when they come for you?" at Walker, blaming him for what he has done to Dubai while also mocking

him. In a sense, the Radioman's role in *The Line* is to ridicule the player for playing the game. Well, not for *playing* the game so much as for wanting to play the game. What? You expected to actually achieve something in a game where you knew you were going to shoot hundreds of men? You expected to not feel utterly uncomfortable about it? Maybe you deserve to be laughed it.

Over the top of the Radioman's rendition, Lugo shouts "Don't listen to him!" on the radio. I assumed he was telling Walker not to listen to the Radioman, but in fact he isn't thinking about Walker at all. He is talking to Adams, telling him to not listen to the 33rd soldier holding Lugo at gunpoint. He is telling Adams not to surrender.

I think it's an interesting juxtaposition. "Don't listen to him!" was exactly what Walker needed to hear to carry on at that point. He knew he could trust his men to say it to him, but, really, his men aren't there for him. I feel narcissistic for assuming they are worrying about me and not dealing with their own problems.

I sneak up on a soldier, steal his sniper rifle, and save Lugo. Walker can't get back to Lugo and Adams from here, however, and we move through the shopping mall with Lugo and Adams on one side, and Walker and myself on the other, each of us taking out enemies the other can't reach like a *Gears of War* co-op segment.

Between skirmishes, Radioman mocks us over the radio, telling us how terrible Delta is. Adams calls Konrad a war criminal back at Radioman, which makes Radioman instantly defensive. He says Konrad has done great things, and he did what he had to do. Adams says Konrad had a choice, like everyone else. Radioman, of course, reminds us of the gate, saying, "Is that burnt baby I smell?" Lugo is furious that Radioman brought that up, promising to murder Radioman if he gets his hands on him (which he eventually does). Lugo and Adams, much like Walker, are clearly suppressing what happened at the gate, trying their hardest not to think about it. In fact, it's telling how rarely the incident at the gate is explicitly mentioned in the later chapters of the game. Yet, it is always there on Delta's mind, as well as the player's. All Radioman had to do was mention burnt baby and I knew *exactly* what he was talking about.

*

It's during this segment that the game's first explicit hallucination happens. There were suggestions before now that Walker's perception of the world (and our perception of it through Walker) may not be entirely accurate: Konrad's face appearing on billboards, the hanging corpses appearing out of nowhere, the reflection without a body. But on a first play, all of these are very easily missed. It is in this mall that most players will first question the reality of Walker's world. It is in this mall that we get the first undeniable evidence that something is not right with this world.

Moving to flank a heavy machine gun that has Lugo and Adams pinned, Walker passes through an old clothes store, alone. A few mannequins stand around the place as 33rd soldiers pour in from the opposing door and attack me. The screen starts flashing black. No, not flashing. More like strobing. As it strobes, I have to somehow shoot the enemies. Every time I shoot one the screen goes black and comes back again, and where I killed the soldier now stands a mannequin. As I kill more soldiers the room fills with mannequins, the inanimate things standing in the place of each man I kill. Finally, as the room fills with mannequins, a heavy walks into the room, slowly marching towards me. I spray bullets wildly, occasionally hitting one of the mannequins and crumbling it into pieces. Every time I manage to pin the heavy down in my crosshair, the screen goes black, comes back, and he is approaching from another angle. Where he was standing is, instead, another

mannequin. Several mannequins later, when I finally manage to put enough bullets into the heavy to drop him, he says, "I remember you!" and dies.

There's a *Half-Life 2* mod called "Nightmare House." I haven't played it, but the YouTube video I watched years ago has stuck with me ever since. In the segment shown in the video, the player moves through these dark corridors full of mannequins that seem to move when the player isn't looking at them. The player looks one way, turns around, then looks back, and suddenly there are more mannequins. It's really quite terrifying, and I was thinking of "Nightmare House" as I struggled to kill the teleporting heavy.

Mannequins are uncanny. It's the implied movement of things not real, of humans not human. *The Line* doesn't quite have that movement, but as the heavy teleports all over the shop and as the people transform into mannequins (or are they revealed to having always been mannequins?), it's truly unnerving.

What the mannequin scenes seem to suggest in each of these games is that human enemies are more terrifying when they are *not* human. It's something that *Bioshock* plays on, too, in its Fort Frolic sequence. In *Bioshock*, the mannequins are more terrifying because they actually are humans—or at least they were. Each one is a papier-mâché corpse. Some of them jump to life when you aren't looking at them.

One question that *The Line* wants its players to ask themselves is: "When I kill in a videogame, am I actually killing?" The most obvious answer is of course not. But what is actually happening in my mind? Throughout the game, I've been using snippets of dialogue to turn waves of animated polygons running at me into real people in my imagination before I shoot them down. I can relate to them, think of them as human, but I kill them anyway. This scene in the clothes shop forces me to face the unreality of it: these aren't real people—these are mannequins. What this scene seems to suggest is what I find really terrifying is the possibility that I'm *not* killing people. Do you actually kill when you kill in a videogame? It seems like I want to feel like I am actually killing people, so off-putting do I find the non-human mannequins, and that is terrifying.

Or another reading: maybe *The Line* is rubbing Walker's and my faces in our desire to other our victims. We other them *so much* that they start to appear as not human at all. It forces Walker—and me—to see what a real un-human looks like and, in turn, to accept that the people I am killing *are* human, be they actual or virtual.

The hallucination ends with little commentary from Walker. Lugo and Adams are still waiting for him (it is worth noting that this hallucination only happened while Walker was alone) and he rushes off to help.

It's easy to forget just how sudden this hallucination was, and it is something that is worth stressing. As we play the game two or three or four times, we know from the start that Walker's world is not entirely real. But, as a first time player, regardless of what messed-up things we have done with Walker, we have played for hours before this point without being given any reason to question the reality of this world. And then, suddenly and without comment, I just walk into a room and an explicitly not-real event happens. For the first time player, it is the first moment that you are *forced* to doubt the reality of what is going on. And then it finishes with no explanation, and the player just has to keep going with a head full of new doubts.

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Moving on through another segment of the mall, Walker heads past what looks like a display for a new videogame. "LEGIONS OF RAKATOR III" it says behind a larger-than-life model of a creature that looks like an Ork right out of Warhammer 40,000. The underhanging jaw with sharp teeth, the sunglasses, the strangely old-fashioned and over-sized machine guns. But, the thing is, the model isn't an Ork, but a monstrous man—the flesh is white,

not green. This is, clearly, a monster of a man. A monster of a man who is from a videogame. The analogy is pretty obvious.

Behind the model, we walk up a curved staircase with a panorama of the game painted on the wall. As we curve around, the painting seems to tell a panoramic narrative of a fantastical battle. It starts with several Orkmen standing on a mountain of skulls with gunships overhead (the way they are posed makes me think of the photograph *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*). Curving around, the last scene before I am shooting 33rd soldiers again is of a giant, monstrous beast (not at all a human one) being chained and restrained by a large squad of men. It seems that the more Walker tries to convince himself that it is the 33rd that are the monsters, the more he realises that the real monster is him, and the more the world itself confirms this.

Finally for the chapter is a turret sequence where I have to fend off the 33rd for Lugo and Adams as they make their way to the ceiling of their side of the mall to zipline over to where I am. Over the top plays Black Mountain's "Stormy High," another darker rock song.

Once Delta is finally together again, the chapter is over, but not before a final cut scene. Delta catch a 33rd soldier sneaking up on us (or, more likely, hiding from us).

The look in Walker's eyes as Lugo and Adams restrain the man is terrifying: he is calm, deliberate in his actions. He wants blood. I have never

before been so certain as to what is happening behind the face of one of my playable characters. Is it because he is so well animated? Or is it because I know exactly how he feels?

The captured soldier, on the other hand, looks absolutely terrified.

"What's this?" Walker says to the surrendered soldier. "Someone doesn't want to play soldiers any more?"

The soldier gives you his name: Staff Sergeant Josh Forbes. He starts listing his service number, too, but Walker interrupts and puts a pistol against the man's head: "You are not a prisoner of war. Far as I'm concerned, you're not even a fucking soldier."

When did this change happen? I can't place it. At what point was Walker's gunning down of the 33rd no longer justified as simply fighting back to defend himself, his men, or the refugees? Here, when Forbes has no gun of his own, is not fighting back, the descent of Walker is most jarringly visible. He is not making excuses. He is not blaming other people. He is holding a pistol to a US soldier's head, and he is reveling in it. The change had been so steady and slow, but suddenly I'm aware of just how much Walker has changed. I can hardly believe this is the man I've been spending the hours with. But it's too late. There is nothing I can do to stop him now. I can just sit there, helpless, as the cut scene plays out.

Forbes begs: "You can't."

"I can do whatever the fuck I want," Walker replies.

When did this happen? When did Walker go from insisting he has no choice but to do these things to doing them because he can do whatever he wants?

The glare in his eyes. The clenched fists. Without a doubt, Walker has crossed a line in his mind. He didn't cross it just now, but it is clear that at some point he did cross it, and I just kept walking him deeper down the path.

Forbes, meanwhile, is terrified, trembling. He wants to live. Next to Forbes' unmarked flesh, Walker's cut up, crisped half of his face with bloodshot eyes looks like some kind of demon. The 33rd man isn't the monster in this scene. Walker is.

Forbes points out a skyscraper in the distance, the Trans-Emirates tower, and tells Delta to head towards it to find the Radioman. Then he notes with a sudden resilience that "All the Colonel wanted was to keep people alive. Remember that."

Walker doesn't shoot him, but knocks him out with the butt of his pistol, angrily. "We'll remember that next time he tries to kill us."

Lugo and Adams don't even budge. They are okay with what Walker is doing.

Sitting in my lounge room, holding the controller, I don't want the cut scene to end. Not because I enjoy watching it, but the idea of having to once again *be* this man is suddenly incredibly unattractive. I have been forced to realise something terrible about the three men I am sharing this journey with. This isn't a matter of circumstance that caused them to do what they did to Forbes. It was something they wanted to do. It was something from inside of them. I don't want to join these three men anymore. I want them to leave Dubai.

I have a choice, of course. I could stop playing. But maybe I'm as blind as Walker is. He doesn't leave Dubai, and I don't turn the game off. Instead, we head onwards towards the Trans-Emirates tower to find the Radioman.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE ROOFTOPS

Leaving the shopping complex, on our way to the Trans-Emirates tower to hijack the broadcast, a conversation starts over who is going to be the one that kills the Radioman. Walker warns them to expect the unexpected, to which Adams coolly responds, "Adapt and overcome, bitch." Lugo flippantly adds, "Hey, whatever's necessary."

From the mall, Delta has exited onto a rooftop. To get to the Trans-Emirate tower Delta must, again, hop from skyscraper-top to skyscraper-top, much like the earlier chapter, "The Edge". It's both cyclical (just like the road right after the gate mirrored the road at the start of the game) and contributes to the metaphor of Walker's own mental highs and lows. They started up high, dropped down into the darkness, and now, once again, Walker and Delta are on a high. But it is a slightly different high. It's an unhinged kind of confidence. They have a purpose, as misguided as it is. From here, they can only go down.

Shortly after the casual discussion about murdering Radioman, a helicopter flies overhead, heading towards the tower.

"Great, reinforcements," Adams sighs.

"Hey," Walker responds. "More target practice."

Killing has become so easy. Be it a discussion about who will murder Radioman or the waves of 33rd between here and there as simply targets that have to be dealt with. Between how Walker dealt with Forbes at the end of the last chapter and these trivial discussions, the change in Walker is stark. The gradual shift of Walker and his men since Chapter Eight has gone from being horrified of what they have done, to accepting of what they have become, to a clarity of what they will do next has come full circle. A clarity that will only drop them further down.

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From the floor below us we hear a shot. A sniper nest is right underneath us. From the snipers' conversation we understand that the refugees are rioting, probably about the lack of water. The snipers are pissed. "All this work for nothing," one of them laments. They argue about whether they will be able to rebuild Dubai again, or if the latest violence has finally destroyed it. One of the snipers is particularly grumpy because another soldier has his cigarettes.

Much like the last time I moved across rooftops, I am reminded that these 33rd soldiers are humans with names, worries, and nicotine addictions. Again, it's just little token things, but there are so many little, token things that together they constantly build up a world of actual human beings—no matter how much I try to convince myself they are just mannequins.

Sneaking down to their level, we have the chance to take them out quietly. I paint one with a target, and Walker tells Adams to take him out. I sit there behind a wall and watch from the side as Adams slowly walks up behind the man, pulls out his knife, and shoves it into the man's neck before throwing him off the edge. Adams has truly become one of "those guys" that could fuck you up.

We quietly take out the rest of the snipers. We're about to move on when I notice the wall. Four names are written in chalk: Smith, Kurtis, Gregory, Thompson. Beside each is a tallied score. This is clearly the number of kills each sniper has gotten while in the nest. There is a weird paradoxical affect of this graffiti. On the one hand, it gives names to the men I just murdered, making them more than just numbers. Like everything in the game, this reminds me that they were people.

But then there are the scores. For the snipers, at a distance from their targets, the people they killed were just numbers to them, even though there were real people. The 33rd men, who are real men just like Walker, are just as likely to distance themselves from who they kill, to other and dehumanise them. They aren't people; just targets. This in no way justifies Walker, Lugo, and Adam's actions in Dubai. Rather, it simply shows they aren't special. Like everyone else, they are just killing fellow humans while refusing to accept it.

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In the next room we start a firefight with more 33rd soldiers while the song "Nowhere To Run" by Martha Reeves & The Vandellas plays through

the makeshift speakers. Just the name of the song seems indicative: Walker et al have ventured too deep into Dubai, and there's no escaping now. The lyrics, when you look at them, are even more telling:

I know you're no good for me
But free of you, I'll never be, no

Each night, as I sleep, into my heart you creep,
I wake up feeling sorry I met you,
Hoping soon, that I'll forget you

When I look in the mirror, to comb my hair
I see your face just-a-smilin' there

Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, from you baby
Got nowhere to run to baby, nowhere to hide

I know that you're no good for me.
But you've become a part of me.

You've become a part of me. The song is about the singer not being able to get over an unobtainable love, but the lyrics fit perfectly with the way Konrad has crept into Walker's mind, with the weird plurality of identities he holds deep inside of himself—that we all hold inside ourselves. We aren't just a single 'self' but overlapping, contradictory, and flickering multiple selves. This is what Walker and his squad are dealing with. It's the heart of darkness that Conrad explores. It's the thing under the layers that Walt Williams says he wants to peel back. As if to make a point, halfway through the battle, as reinforcements start dropping in, Adams yells out "Kill the fuckers!" Not take down the targets. Kill the fuckers.

*

We clear the room and the distant snipers, and Walker takes a zipline through the gut of one building and straight into another. It's a long zip so, for a time, Walker is alone and free to have more hallucinations.

Just before he gets to the end of the zipline, a 33rd soldier walks into view. Walker lands on top of him, knocking him to the ground. But the 33rd soldier is no longer a 33rd soldier; he is Adams. Adams lying on the ground in front of Walker with a "B: EXECUTE" command hovering beneath him. I'm confused. Did Adams go across before me? I don't think he did. "Stop!" Adams shouts while that B:EXECUTE just sits there, begging to be obeyed.

Eventually, I notice that 'Adams' is slowly lifting a pistol towards me, so I press B.

In the first *Halo*, the Covenant Elites and Jackals spray litres of bluepurple blood if you hit them. Even after they die you can just keep hitting them and this bluepurple blood will splash all over the walls and ground. There was this weird pseudo-glitch, though, that the blood didn't fade away. So if you kept hitting the body of one dead alien over and over, you could paint the ground in layers and layers of alien blood until the framerate slowed to a crawl as the Xbox tried to deal with all these extra layers of blood. I used to do this because it was fun to make the Xbox slow down, for my in-game actions to have an actual, material effect on the hardware. But, now that I think back to it, there must have been at least one time where I bashed the absolute shit out of a dead alien just to make blood squirt everywhere before I knew doing so would slow the Xbox down. For some reason that I can't possibly imagine now, I used to brutalise those bodies.

This is what I am thinking after I press B and Walker destroys Adams/33rd soldier's head with the butt of his rifle. He bashes the man's skull over and over while screaming "No!". He stops and there is a flash and Adams is no longer Adams. He is, indeed, a 33rd soldier. My actions, Walker's actions, though, were no hallucination. He really did destroy the man's head. And what about my victim's actions? He wasn't really Adams, but he may have very well been really shouting, "Stop!" I think back to how Walker looked as he loomed over Forbes at the end of the previous chapter. That face was the last thing this man saw before I pulverized his head.

When real Adams comes down the zipline, he sees the mess and exclaims, "Jesus Walker. What the fuck did you do?"

Walker is breathing hard, and stutters a bit. "He, uh, he caught me off guard."

Lugo (having landed as Walker talks) seems ambivalent about the whole thing. "Hey, it happens."

I can't stop looking at the arc of blood painted on the ground beneath and around the man's head; I can't stop thinking about those Elites I used to mutilated. I wish I could remember why I had ever done that.

*

We continue on until we are standing atop a skyscraper opposite the Trans-Emirates tower. Atop the Trans-Emirates is a cone of glass, housing more floors and rooms, and crowned in satellite dishes. One has a smiley face painted on the dish, and another has a peace symbol. It reminds me of Private Joker's peace badge in *Full Metal Jacket*, sitting beside BORN TO KILL painted on his helmet. Almost like the entire building is trying to suggest something about the duality of man or something.

Looking across, there is a lower rooftop with guards patrolling, intermingled with more mannequins. From this distance, it is hard to pick out which are the men and which are the mannequins. Clearly, this is a nod back to Walker's hallucination of the previous chapter, where the idea of his victims not being human (or the confrontation with the realisation that he was turning his victims into non-humans inside his own mind). But here, things are more ambiguous. Soldiers aren't turning into mannequins; they stand side-by-side, one blurring into the other over the distance, as if to say my enemies are both soldiers and mannequins.

And, well, they really are. I'm not really killing anyone when I play a violent videogame. These people aren't real, they actually are just digital mannequins. Just 0s and 1s made to look like flat triangles on my screen that in turn are made to look like 3D human beings. Yet, at the same time, I really am killing. In my brain, I am not choosing to pull the right trigger while the white pixels of my crosshair overlaps with the pixels of the enemy triangles. I am choosing to shoot a man in the head. Videogame violence sits in this weird, pluralised middle ground. I'm not really killing, but I really am. The mannequins are men are mannequins.

From our high position, we take to the sniper rifles and put down all the guards. As we fire, hitting man and mannequin, Radioman mocks us. "Not that guy! I liked that guy!" or "That one had children" or "Well, I owed him money anyway." It's sarcastic and patronising, but it still paints my targets as real humans. Neither The Line nor the Radioman are willing to let me other the 33rd.

Once we take them all out, we zipline across. As we get closer, the blood and the torn-off limbs and the crumbled mannequins are offered a new detail they didn't possess from our sniper positions. The blood smeared across the glass disco light flooring and the scattered, dismembered limbs pop into view about halfway across the zipline. Similar to the targeting computer at the gate, the zipline rubs my face in what I have just done, refusing to let me stay at a safe distance.

"Where's all this violence come from?" admonishes Radioman. "Is it the video games? I bet it's the video games."

It's almost a moment of dry comedy, the violent videogame reprimanding violent videogames while I stand surrounded by gore and mannequins. Radioman breaks the fourth wall a couple of times (E for Everybody's thirsty; singing to the background music), but none as explicitly as this. It's the bluntest moment that the game explicitly notes it is talking about videogame violence. On one level, it is a painfully forced and unfunny joke. On another level, Radioman is exactly right. Even as I become more and more disturbed by who and what Walker is becoming, nothing is really that far out of the ordinary for me. Videogames have taught me to keep walking forward and shoot whoever gets in my road because those are clearly the bad guys, and that is what I keep doing. This violence in *The Line* absolutely comes from other videogames.

*

We head upstairs through the Radioman's living quarters. It is all psychedelic colours, UV lights, glowing jellyfish, mannequins, and empty beer cans. It's all very hippy-ish. The Radioman as the voice of the 33rd really does symbolise a weird duality of man. It is the Radioman who most clearly bridges the divide between *Apocalypse Now* and *The Line*'s modern setting — both as a blatant nod to one of the film's characters and through permeating the entire game with various nods to the era the film depicts. When we imminently meet him upstairs, the Radioman is a clear nod to Dennis Hopper's character in *Apocalypse Now*. But more than that, the Radioman is a washed-up old hippy, living as though it still is the 70s now. He is the one that continues to play the protest era (and protest era-ish) songs; he is the

one who paints peace signs on satellite dishes (or at least orders them to be painted); he is the one that lives in these psychedelic quarters.

Yet, here he is seemingly leading a US army battalion and commanding a totalitarian society. Upstairs in the glass cone, his control deck washed in sunlight, is the Radioman himself. He is surrounded by cigarette butts and records. He doesn't seem too concerned that we have made it here. Either he is stoned, or he wants to die, or… I don't know. I don't understand the Radioman at all. He just scares me because I do not get him. He disturbs me because I cannot easily categorise him.

But it's still a shock when, after a friendly conversation over radio technologies, Lugo shoots him multiple times. He doesn't restrain him; he just shoots him. Lugo claims it was because he knew Radioman would bring more forces down on them, but I wonder if it is because Lugo promised Radioman he would kill him over the radio if they ever met, and he had to keep that promise, just to cling to whatever principles he can in this hell.

And so Radioman is another character killed off with little fanfare—just alive one minute and dead the next.

Adams is shocked, but Walker doesn't seem to care at all. He walks over to the radio, now broadcasting over all of Dubai, and says "We're here to rescue you. But first, the 33rd will pay for what they've done." While he says this, the camera only shows the darkened, bloody side of his face, the dark side of his personality. He is angry. Empty. I can see in his face that deep down he still blames himself for what happened at the gate but is suppressing it with blame on the 33rd. I don't think I have ever before projected so much onto the surface of a playable character.

But I'm also surprised at what Walker has said on the radio. I almost feel betrayed by my own character. We were coming here to use the radio to bring in effect a mass evacuation. When we got here, Walker pretty much has said "Look we will evacuate you, but first I have to kill everyone." As the player, I feel helpless. This isn't what I came here for. I came here to help people, Walker. You came here to help people.

*

Walker hears Konrad's voice again: "If you will not learn from my mistakes. There is nothing more I can do."

A helicopter flies over and lands outside, dropping off more 33rd troops. Lugo, interestingly, takes command. He orders Adams and I to run for the helicopter as he provides sniper support.

We shoot our way there, back down through the Radioman's hippy home and across the dance floor mannequins that survived the last skirmish. Once we get to the helicopter, Walker jumps on the turret to cover Lugo as Adams starts it up.

Maybe this is just how modern gatling guns actually work, but it feels a lot like the gatling guns in *Modern Warfare*. The kind that don't feel so much like a spray of bullets than like a laser of hot lead just slicing through flesh. It even makes the same high-pitch noise as *Modern Warfare*'s guns. It's a typical turret sequence: enemies run at me out of the various orifices of the building as I spray bullets all over them. It is even set up like most turret sequences in most games: I fought my way to the enemy's turret, then use it against them as they stupidly run right into my path.

But that all changes once Lugo gets into the helicopter. Adams is about to fly away. This is it: Delta could take off and fly right out of Dubai, escaping this hell. But Walker orders Adams to circle around, so he "can see what this gun can do." Walker still refuses to leave Dubai, and so we circle the tower, destroying everything and everyone. While most turret sequences are defensive, this is highly offensive. These enemies aren't stupidly running at me through a bottleneck. They have nowhere to run at all as we just hover above them, unleashing hell. It's unprovoked and terrible. Walker is obsessed. "33rd want Dubai? Fine. We'll bury them here!" he yells.

It doesn't feel like shooting up an army base. It feels like shooting up a home. A TV explodes into the swimming pool. Windows shatter over boxes of food and medical supplies. This isn't about survival or helping people. This is eradication and revenge for something that was, in fact, our own fault.

On my first game, the gravity of what was happening here didn't really hit me. It was on my second game that I really realised we were destroying a home, cutting down defenseless 33rd soldiers just to satisfy our bloodlust. At other moments, Delta have done terrible things, but this is the moment that sheer, insane bloodlust completely takes over. Up in the air, sitting behind a gatling gun with infinite ammo, this is the absolute pinnacle of Walker's self-

righteous lunacy before, inevitably, everything comes crashing back down. And, on my first game, I just go along with it without a second thought.

*

Because we wasted time destroying the 33rd's home, reinforcements had time to catch up to us. If we had escaped straight away instead of lingering around just to destroy everything in sight, maybe we could've got away.

And so, as the helicopters chase us across the ruins of Dubai, we are finally back at the prologue. The first section of the game where we were gunning down helicopters as the credits passed before we crashed and the screen said "Earlier…"

Except, we aren't 'back' anywhere; we are simply here again. We played that part then, and we are playing this part now. They are two different instances of this event. As though reflecting this, Walker gets confused and suffers from *déjà vu*. "Wait," he says. "We've been here before!"

Nothing else is said of it as he focuses on shooting the pursuing helicopters, but it is such a fascinating moment. It's a moment where the game almost explicitly acknowledges its own game-ness and the ghostly presence of the player. Walker's déjà vu is his sensing of the player's presence, the player's memory. It's like he is stretching back, out of the tv, and groping for the player's mind. It's like Walker can sense my memories. It seems to suggest that if I am still here, if I am still playing *The Line* after everything that has happened, then Walker and I might have a far more intimate link than we previously suspected.

Walker may as well have turned his head around 180 degrees to look right at the camera for how disturbing I found this utterance. As the player, I am used to feeling safely detached from the gameworld, safe and sound on this side of the glass. With this one line, Walker is almost realising that he is inside of a videogame, and he makes me question my own safety, my own detachment.

On the *Gamespot* podcast, Walt Williams talks about one possible reading of the game based around this *déjà vu*. He says that you could interpret the game as Walker having died in the helicopter crash right at the start, and the rest of the game is him just reliving the events that led up to it, over and over again.

I think this is a really interesting reading (and one that completely stuns Williams's interviewers), but I'm not sure if it quite works. If Walker did die

here, what does that mean for the next three chapters still to go? They exist outside of that looping limbo, do they not?

As an aside here, though, I find it fascinating that the author of the game has 'interpretations' of the game. He doesn't say what is the story; he just suggests another interpretation. Of course, there will be people that take the author's word as gospel. I've already seen various internet message boards claiming Williams said Walker is dead the whole time (which he does not definitively say). Conversely, that Williams has his own interpretations reinforces the notion that there is no single, certain, objective reality as to 'what happened' in *The Line*. In some games you don't know what actually happened because they are poorly written. In *The Line* you don't know what happened because it is superbly written. There are threads that you can follow, but none of them will take you to the truth. There is no the truth. Only a whole heap of subjective perspectives.

The helicopter scene does play out slightly differently from the prologue, with seeker missiles to be shot down and a few enemies in different locations. But, still, this is clearly a version of the events that precluded the game.

And, just like the start, our helicopter collides with an enemy helicopter just as the storm hits, smashing us into the ground and painting the screen black.

*

Konrad's voice over the blackness. He orders Walker to wake up, to see what he has done. Walker wakes up in a hallucinatory hell. In front of him is an Eye of Sauron-like tower wrapped in flames. The sand is gushing into a chasm beneath Walker's feet. The sky is a blood red. Bodies are writhing in the sand ahead. As I walk Walker forward, several of Walker's victims stumble towards him, zombified, then disappear. People who, Konrad explains, "Were just following orders." This is what Walker has done. He has turned Dubai from a dead city into a living hellhole.

"I had no choice" Walker insists.

"You always had a choice," responds Konrad's voice. "You just fucked it up."

"There were five thousand people in Dubai the day before you arrived," says Konrad's voice. "How many are alive today, I wonder? I thought my duty was to protect this city from the storm. I was wrong. It was to protect it from you."

That final *you* sounds like it is directed right at me, the player. Videogame worlds, generally, are so peaceful until we come along. It is in the act of playing that their content, happy little worlds become destroyed and chaotic. We come along and we kill so many people in these worlds! More than is ever really possible. And, as long as these worlds are videogame worlds, we kind of need to kill so many of them. Sure, it is probably possible to make a game where every single, individual kill feels significant, where we kill maybe five enemies in a game instead of five hundred. We already have games like this (*Shadow of the Colossus*, for instance). But by and large, we need countless targets to take out. We enjoy the rhythm of aiming and shooting, aiming and shooting, aiming and shooting over and over again. And that requires lots of targets. *The Line* doesn't offer an alternative to that model, but neither does it ignore its incredulity. Konrad thinks I have killed a large percentage of five thousand people. By the very end of the game, it will be implied that Walker and Delta have killed everyone.

It shouldn't be possible. It actually, physically shouldn't be possible. But it is what we do in practically every single videogame that requires us to kill people. *The Line* doesn't offer an alternative to this model, it just shows it for the madness that it is. Walker shouldn't be possible. He is a monster. In the worlds of videogames, the player is a monster.

From the height of the rooftops, from the foolhardy confidence that Delta swaggered into this chapter with, they have plummeted. They used that cocksureness to destroy the 33rd's home, and in turn, have been destroyed, Walker sent to hell for his sins—literally, even, for the moments of his hallucination.

As Walker stumbles in the sand, the hallucination flashes away to the reality of Dubai under the sand—but the half-buried bodies remain.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ADAMS

After the helicopter crash, Walker is even more injured and bloodied. The half of his face that was scratched and bruised is now burned a crisp black, completing his two-faced evolution. Walker's character progression (that is, his bodily regression) makes me think of John McClane in *Die Hard*. What I love so much about *Die Hard* is that McClane gets hurt, and he stays hurt. Even as he kills a disproportionate number of people in entirely inhuman ways, McClane feels human in a way few action heroes ever feel. Walker is the same. Despite the impossible, inhumane number of soldiers he mows down, the amount of his own blood he is spilling onto the sand makes him undeniably still human. That's what is so terrifying about him: he is both clearly a monster and clearly a human.

Adams is on the radio, trying to get in touch with Walker. He is at the crashed helicopter and needs assistance. It is interesting that this chapter is named after Adams when Lugo is the one who ends up dying towards the end of it. Perhaps it is because of what Lugo's death will ultimately do to Adams, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I walk Walker across the sand ocean, amongst half sunken bodies and ships. I come towards the helicopter, surrounded by the 33rd, and shoot the first soldier in the back of the head.

"Got the son of a bitch!" Walker shouts.

Another 33rd soldier turns and fires, hitting Walker a few times. Walker stutters and shouts, "Fuck you!" as I hide him back behind cover. All of his military discipline, all of the distance he built between himself and the people he is murdering, has crumbled away. He is no longer just dropping target or boasting about kills or even keeping score. He is shouting *at* his prey. The violence has reached a new level of intimacy.

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I die, trying to save Adams, and the loading screen tip reads: *Do you feel like a hero yet?*

It's a weird, startling kind of cognitive dissonance. Until now, the loading screen tips had mostly been generic suggestion as to how to kill certain enemies, how to use different weapons, etc. Occasionally it has given me bits of back-story. It told me, once, that Walker doesn't like to talk about what happened in Kabul. But never before now has the game just kind of turned, looked at me sitting there in the lounge room of my apartment, and asked "Well? Are you enjoying what you are doing here?"

Much like Walker's reflection in the monitor of the targeting computer at the gate, it *forces* me as a player to be self-reflective. I can't just sit there and shake my head at Walker for being weak and getting himself into this situation. Walker walked, but the player played. I got him here while sitting safely at home. But now the game is making sure I am a part of this; the game is making sure I realise that I am responsible for this.

But more than that, it also hits home just how stupidly meaningless everything I've done in this game has been up to know. Not since we found the original distress beacon have Delta actually done anything constructive or useful. Walker's constantly shifting goalposts have achieved nothing—they were never going to. But he went after them because he though he could help; he thought he wasn't like all these foolish people turned violent by the conditions in Dubai. And I, foolishly, believed him. I'm a videogame player. I'm special, right? My objectives are special, right? I'm a hero, right?

As this loading screen makes me realise, though, I don't feel like a hero at all.

*

I save Adams on my third or fourth attempt, after destroying the 33rd with bullet, grenades, and slander. Adams is badly hurt, looking as beat up as Walker.

We continue through the washed-up ships. I don't quite understand where this chapter takes place. Has a storm come in from the ocean and washed the boats onto the shore? Or has sand washed out to sea and covered the water? I don't quite understand it, but the point is there are boats buried in the sand.

We go past one boat called *White Bird* as a literal white bird (maybe a

seagull?) flies off the hull into the sky. Maybe a ham-fisted metaphor that any chance of peace has flown away from Dubai? It's a stark contrast to the black crows that haunt the rest of the game.

Other washed up husks of boats have interesting names, too: *Magnificence*, *Eternal Wisdom*, *Anthea*. "Magnificence" and "Eternal Wisdom" seem to ironically patronise Walker (and myself). He marched into Dubai with his head held high; he was here to do what was 'right'. He undoubtedly thought himself wise and his intentions magnificent. Seeing such words splashed on the upturned ships in the sand after everything just seem to be mocking Walker after everything he has done, after everything chiseled into his flesh.

Anthea is apparently an epithet for the Greek god Hera, one of Zeus's wives. She's the god of marriage, women, and birth, which seems to put her out of place in the testosterone-fuelled, male-dominated world of *The Line* (and shooters generally) but, interestingly, Wikipedia notes that she is known for "her jealous and vengeful nature." I think that could aptly describe a certain playable character I am leading through the sand.

Fellow game critic Dan Golding has made the observation that the player first approaches many of *The Line*'s battlefields from the side, that you turn a corner and all of a sudden you are in the middle of a gunfight. This has the disorientating effect of ensuring that you rarely know exactly the lay of the battlefield before the fight starts. This effects me particularly in these later

chapters. The skirmishes with the 33rd in this area give me all kinds of hell. I can never quite figure out where I should take cover or where the enemies are coming from. Only having one squadmate (as we are yet to find Lugo) surely doesn't help, either. I die again and again, and each time the loading screen forces me to reflect on just how meaningless this whole mission has been:

You're still a good person.

Can you even remember why you came here?

Who is this omniscient tormentor? Is it Walker talking to me? Is it Konrad talking to Walker? Is it Konrad talking to me? The developer talking to me? Is it my own personal Konrad talking to me? Maybe the Radioman has been liberated through his death to continue his prodding at the fourth wall from outside the confines of the gameworld.

I think the loading screen messages work as a jumping off point for the player to find the duality of man that has messed Walker up so badly inside of themselves. Sitting there, waiting for another chance to murder the 33rd men that just murdered me, I am forced to ask myself if I am a good person for doing this. What's the point? Why carry on? Why not just stop now? I know this is not going to go anywhere good. Why am I still going? *The Line* doesn't want me to stop playing; it wants me to realise that I *won't* stop playing. And it wants me to question what the fact that I refuse to stop says about me.

The dialog has shifted further, too. Adams and Walker are both swearing nearly every second word now. It sounds like every other shooter, and it is all the more disturbing for it. I'll paint a solder with the crosshair and Walker will shout out "Kill that fucking sniper!" or "I need him *dead*!" He is no longer avoiding the deaths that his words create. He is reveling in them. Using them as fuel for his anger.

After a while, Lugo contacts us on the radio. He is up ahead, his arm is broken, and he is surrounded by the 33rd. As we head towards him through the skeleton of another boat, Adams mutters to himself that he doesn't know if Lugo will get through this.

"It's just a broken arm," says Walker. "We've all been through worse."

Adams stops and turns around, blocking the path forward. "You know that's not what I'm talking about. This whole mission is fucked. We just took out a whole tower of American troops."

Indeed, the senseless violence of the tower did have an affect on my men. I feel so bad now, in retrospect, knowing I felt nothing while I did it on my

first game. It was just a turret sequence to me. Nothing more. Such a heinous act was just so… ordinary that I didn't even notice it was heinous.

Walker says what he always says: "They didn't leave us any choice."

"YOU didn't leave us any choice!" Adams responds.

They are both wrong. Walker didn't need to shoot up the tower, but he persuaded himself he did. Adams didn't have to follow Walker's orders—he had the pilot's seat; he could've just flown away, but he followed orders. I could've stopped playing the game at any time, but I keep following orders. Everybody doesn't have a choice, but only because we choose to have no choice.

"What the fuck happened to us man?" laments Adams. He knows they have lost something, but he is not quite yet as far-gone as Walker is. Or, perhaps he is further gone. Gone enough that he can reflect back and know he has fallen while Walker is still falling and hasn't hit the bottom yet.

Indeed, Walker is in denial. He says nothing has happened to us. "We're fucking soldiers."

Adams nods and sarcastically quips, "Oh my mistake, I understand."

The next skirmish takes me multiple attempts. We have to run across an open space and camp out on a half-sunken yacht as jeeps drop waves of 33rd men behind us. The game asks me if I want to change difficulty settings at least three times. Thanks, I say, but no thanks. Slowly, I work out a methodical way to take out the opponents that work: run to the back of the boat; kill the heavy with a sticky grenade; run under the boat; take out the 33rd on the far side; grenades to take out the top deck. I do it so many times that my actions becomes clockwork.

We camp on the top deck as a storm hits and more 33rd flank us. We keep them at bay until the storm clears and Adams gleefully takes the newly-exposed 33rd soldiers down, laughing as he sprays them with machine gun fire.

"Feel better now?" Walker asks bitterly.

"Not even close," says Adams.

*

We leave the boat and head towards a refugee camp where Lugo has taken refuge from the storm. As we approach the camp, Lugo starts screaming for help. I hold down A and run Walker down into the twisting corridors of the tent city. There are no people around. Lugo is screaming at whoever

is attacking him, telling them to stay away from him. It feels like we are running for an excruciatingly long time around the makeshift town until we find him, strung up to a girder, hanging from a rope around his throat, his face covered in the blood pouring from his nose, surrounded by angry refugees.

It's a shocking sight, but an entirely understandable one—perhaps the fact it is understandable is what makes it so shocking. Walker and Adams shoot at the rope, dropping Lugo, and scaring back the civilians.

I always thought, while this was happening, that it was totally understandable, that the civilians could have easily mistaken Lugo for a member of the 33rd, and that it would make sense that they would take out their anger on him. But just now, writing this, I realise that they never had to think of him as 33rd to justifiably want him dead. If they knew he was Delta, they would have even more reasons to hang him.

It's a strange kind of denial that happened solely inside of me. I had still assumed, on some ingrained and subconscious level, that *we* were the good guys, even as I was consciously aware that we clearly weren't. I saw Lugo hanging, and I decided it was because the civilians made a mistake, thinking he was a 33rd soldier. Because *they* are the bad guys.

The following scene is one of the most subtle and powerful in the game. Walker tries to resuscitate Lugo as Adams holds the crowd at bay. The crowd isn't backing off. They are in Adams's face, angry and shouting. Adams is begging Walker to let him open fire. He wants this. He wants to shoot these bastards that hung his friend. Sitting there, holding the controller, I just know that if Lugo dies, shooting these civilians is going to happen. There will be no choice in the matter. We've sunk this far; we are almost obliged to sink a little further.

Lugo dies. I stand up. And we open fire into the civilians, killing a few and scaring the rest away. We step over the bodies of those we killed and walk through the camp. There is no quick way through. We have to snake around the homes, through their kitchens and over the meek existences of the people we just fired at. The game wants me to see that this place is a home to the people I just killed. It wants me know that I am the invader, that *I* came into *their* home, and I murdered them.

If it wasn't for the achievement popping up on my screen ("A Line Crossed"), I never would have thought there could be any other way to do this segment. In fact, I'm incredibly disappointed there was an achievement here. It would be like being given an achievement for doing "No Russian" in *Modern Warfare 2*. After this, I of course went and looked at the achievement list and found out there was a way to do this segment without killing the civilians.

It's really sad that the game tells me explicitly that I made a choice, because it truly is not an obvious one. There is no "Press A to shoot civilians, Press B to not shoot civilians" binary. Here, where at first glance I don't have any choice to make, I am making one of the only truly moral decisions of the entire game. It just would've been nice if I had to figure out it was a choice myself, and not have been told by the game's achievements.[6]

6. The game's design lead has since lamented the use of achievements for moral choices throughout the game: http://www.joystiq.com/2012/08/13/spec-ops-dev-working-on-a-big-project-probably-isnt-another-sp/

On my second game, I stood there with the refugees and Adams both yelling at me, desperately searching for the way to get through this without killing anyone that I knew existed. It took me a long time before, eventually, I aimed my rifle in the air and opened fire.

The way 'choices' evolve throughout *The Line* works to show us that the way videogames typically depict choices are far removed from the way we really make them. The world doesn't pause every time we have to stop and make a choice. There are rarely choices in our life as clear-cut as pressing A to follow this path or pressing B to follow that one. The choices in our lives that matter are the ones we are making every single second of our lives without ever stopping to think about them. These are the choices that define our existence.

In *The Line*, the most blatant and videogame-y choices aren't really choices at all, and the most important choices you make don't even present themselves as choices. We make choices all the time, and they are hardly distinguishable from the rest of our life. Hell, choices *are* life, and life is nothing but a series of choices. At no point is our encounter with the civilians flagged as a choice. To shoot in the air is to realise you have a choice even when none present themselves. You have to think of it yourself. On my first game, I didn't. I just shot the civilians. Even after everything I've seen, I just killed them. Few people, I am sure, will think to shoot in the air before they think to shoot the civilians. It is only after they have walked through the empty camp and the achievement pops up that they will realise there was another choice. As *The Line*, progresses, its binary moral choices became less blatant while, at the same time, they come to actually allow for meaningful differences. There is always another choice, but it's rarely an obvious one.

On my second game, Adams follows my lead and shoots into the air, scaring the civilians away. "You fucking animals," shouts Adams before he turns to Walker and asks, "You still feel like saving these people?" Lugo's death has drained the last of Adams's empathy. He has completely dehumanised and othered these people now, and it would not bother him in the slightest if he had to gun them down.

On this second game, as we walk through the camp, the refugees are cowering in their homes, still alive, letting us pass. There is still the sense of being an unwelcome invader, but at least the homes aren't empty, at least the refugees aren't dead. The achievement this time says "A Line Held" (unless

we decide to execute any of the civilians in their homes, which we can still do). Killing or not killing these civilians was one line held, perhaps, but it was not *the* line. The entire linear path of *The Line* is a path across the line. Every step from the start to the end of the game is another step across another line.

On my first game though, when I killed the civilians, this moment felt incredibly powerful. The plot of the game originally hinged on how terrible Walker and his squad felt for accidentally killing civilians. Because of that, they went on this hunt for revenge. Now, because of that hunt for revenge, they willfully opened fire on civilians a second time. They didn't make anything better, they just reinforced what had already happened. This time, they don't even care that they killed civilians, so lost they have become. Every step they took into Dubai to redeem themselves has just damned them further. The sun is setting on Dubai, and it's setting on Walker and Adams.

As we get to the camp's exit, Walker kicks in a door and talks on his walkie-talkie to Konrad: "Colonel, if you're listening, this is what is going to happen now. We are going to kill every last one of your men. And then I am going to kill you."

Again, for one last time, Walker's objectives have shifted. Finally, his objective lines up with what he is actually doing. There are no more delusions; Walker knows exactly what he plans to do. Now, finally, he is going to kill everyone. "You brought this on yourself," he says to Konrad. But Konrad is only in his head. Konrad doesn't respond. It is Walker who brought this on himself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE BRIDGE

The final night of the game descends on Walker and Adams as they approach the Burj Khalifa, the tower they 'know' Konrad is in. No one ever told Delta that that is where they will find Konrad. It was just something Walker presumed back in Chapter Ten, not long after he first heard Konrad's voice. Walker has decided this is where Konrad will be, so this is where he will be.

Adams blames Walker for Lugo's death. Walker insists, of course, that there was nothing they could do, that it wasn't their fault. It was Konrad's, and he deserves to die.

"Yeah? What do we deserve?" asks Adams.

What Walker deserves is a question that returns to me at the very end of the game. Of these multiple endings, which one does Walker truly deserve?

But that's getting ahead of myself.

As we approach the bridge that will take us into the Burj Khalifa, a helicopter flies overhead and a somewhat bewildered announcement blares, calling all remaining 33rd soldiers to retreat back to the ground between Delta and the tower: "The marina has fallen! The whole fucking city has fallen!"

It's around this stage the 33rd have started to actually fear Delta. We shouldn't be possible. What we do, cutting down hundreds and hundreds of men, should not be possible. But we do it. Yet again, through the pervasive fear of the 33rd in this final stages, *The Line* manages to comment on something prevalent in all videogames: the unreality of how much death and destruction the player brings along with them. *The Line* doesn't offer an alternative to this—it never offers alternatives—but instead it treats that death and destruction (and the player who brings it) as it should be treated: monstrous, impossible, terrifying, wrong.

I die fairly quickly in the chapter's first skirmish. The loading screen tip assures me: *To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless.* What is so clever and so chilling about

this statement is that when it says, "To kill for entertainment is harmless", there is no differentiation between 'real' killing for entertainment and 'virtual' killing for entertainment. At first, this seemed like a big difference. But then I come back alive and execute a man by pushing my gun into his neck until it snaps, and the difference between real and virtual acts of violence seem to blur together. It's not that I can't tell the difference between 'real' and 'virtual', but maybe that 'real' and 'virtual' aren't as distinct as we like to think. When I chose to press B, I did so to kill a man. There's no real way around that fact.

*

In the next building, moments before I walk up onto the bridge proper, there are bunks beds, footlockers, and photos of smiling soldiers. Histories and lives of people I have killed.

Once we exit upstairs out onto the bridge, a mortar crew fires a white phosphorous shell at us, and the world explodes into another hellish hallucination. The world is on fire, and fiery demons are running at Walker. As I fire my assault rifle at the demons, Konrad's voice says to me, "About time you could join us, Walker." Perhaps I should've suspected at this point that Konrad was already dead, was already in hell. Instead, as the world reappeared around me, I just kept killing people, trying to forget about it.

I said before, when talking about Walker's *déjà vu*, that what I didn't understand about the "Walker's dead" interpretation was that it didn't explain the final three chapters. Where do they fit in that endlessly relived loop between Delta arriving in Dubai and the helicopter crashing? But now that I think about it more, the final few chapters of the game are so… dreamlike. Chapter Thirteen is spent walking across an ocean of sand after rising out of a hell. Then, Chapter Fourteen is truly apocalyptic. Dubai is burning in the background, the flames burning a blood red off the clouds. Walker has eradicated an entire city of people. White phosphorus is being fired at him. These final chapters seem to have only the most tenuous relation to any kind of reality.

The next segment of the game is hard. Really, really hard. I have to work my way up to a gate around various gun turrets, but the path I have to take is not made particularly clear. I die countless times trying to attack the wrong

soldiers or running to the wrong cover. It's frustrating and difficult, and I quit the game at this point for a night without finishing it.

I haven't mentioned before now how the menu screen changes based on what stage of the game you are up to in your most recently played save file. It might be a sentry scanning Dubai with his binoculars on a sniper-focused chapter, or a soldier sitting at a campfire on a nighttime chapter. For Chapter Fourteen, the soldier is dead beneath the upside down flag, two crows picking at his flesh. It marks an end. If the crows are a symbol of Walker's insanity, then at this stage of the game insanity has won and the soldier has lost.

Continuing on, I finally work my way around the turrets, where I find one of the few grenade launchers in the game. I carry it with a reckless abandon, the slow-motion glimpses of the soldiers being torn apart finally seem more gratuitous than disturbing, like Walker is savouring it.

We fight on to the "Visitor Centre", when the door opens and a larger-than-life Lugo marches out.

"It's a fucking heavy!" shouts Adams, but all I see—all Walker sees—is Lugo.

"Lugo!" Walker exclaims.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Adams exclaims.

"Don't you get it?" says the Lugo-heavy in a ghostly, echoing voice. "It's all a lie!"

"NO!" denies Walker as I use him to unleash grenade after grenade at my old comrade.

"You're no fucking hero!" shouts Lugo.

"I tried to save you!" insists Walker as I continue to fill Lugo-heavy with lead now that I am out of grenades.

"You can't save anyone!" Lugo shouts.

"I *tried*!" Walker insists again.

That line. That simple "I *tried*" carries so much emotion. For the first time since near the start of the game, I am reminded I am playing a Nolan North character. The Walker I used to know, the Walker that has been lost forever seems to come back, ever so briefly, in that admission that he may not have succeeded but that he *tried*. Walker really, truly, has tried his hardest to do the right thing in Dubai. He knows he has failed. He knows he has only bought misery but he *tried*.

"This is all your fault! YOURS!" Lugo shouts before he finally dies.

But even once he is dead his voice still haunts Walker: "The only villain

here is you, Walker. There is only you."

"There is only you." Walker is all alone. None of this is real. Or, perhaps, all it means is that Walker is the only bad guy. Adams is talking over the top on the radio, clearly not seeing and hearing what Walker and I are seeing and hearing.

What do the projections of Walker's squadmates onto the enemy signify (Lugo as a heavy, Adams as the soldier Walker rammed at the end of the zipline)? Is it to say that the 33rd are no different from us? Is it to show how Walker's actions have hurt Adams and Lugo (even though they too could've left at any time)? Or, most disturbingly, are they not hallucinations at all? Did Walker actually murder both Lugo and Adams and the rest of the game is Walker trying to deny it? Or, perhaps most simply, Walker is simply haunted by the deaths of his squadmates (which, considering he hallucinates Adams before Adams dies, gives credence to the looping, repeated relived memories theory).

Interestingly, if you die in the skirmish after the Lugo-heavy and reload at the last checkpoint, the heavy is then a normal heavy, not an oversized Lugo. Like a figment of your imagination, if you turn away and look again, it is gone.

By this stage, the game's combat is almost over. There are hardly any 33rd left. This is pushed home by what you find in the next room: A blackboard

listing column after column of names. Layer after layer of dog tags hang from the top, and just visible under all the metal are the words: "We won't forget. KIA of the DAMNED 33rd". Just in front of it is a stack of ammo boxes crowned in candles. It is a shrine to the fallen. The damned fallen.

These aren't just the 33rd that have died; they are the 33rd I have *killed*. Looking beside the shrine there is another board with photos of Walker, Adams, and Lugo. Next to Lugo's photo is a tick. The 33rd want revenge. Looking at the shrine with all its names and dog tags, I can't blame them.

Moving upstairs, I find an elite soldier hidden behind a wall. At first I assume it is a glitch. I had seen him run up here and had shot after him. When he didn't return fire, I assumed I had killed him. I kill him again now without a second thought. But then I realise he probably wasn't glitched. He was hiding. He wasn't in cover. He was cowering. Hiding from Delta. Hiding from the monsters.

*

The next skirmish is the last in the game. It ends with a cut scene as reinforcements arrive, surrounding us atop the gate house, as a helicopter demands we surrender.

Adams is confused. He doesn't understand why they are asking us to surrender. "Fuck you!" he shouts. "Shoot me! Just fucking shoot me!"

Adams can't believe that the 33rd would let them surrender because he knows Delta would no longer let the 33rd surrender. He needs to know that the 33rd are the monsters, not Delta. He needs to know that all this time they were slaughtering the 33rd that the 33rd would not have simply let them stop. But here they are, letting Delta surrender. The truth of what he has become is finally hitting Adams, and he can't stand it.

But Walker surrenders and drops his weapon, justifying it by saying it is the only way to get into the building. Even now that the 33rd are letting Delta give up, Walker is still determined to kill Konrad.

Adams is incredulous. "The mission is over!" he shouts.

"Not while I keep breathing" says Walker.

"Fine," says Adams. "Then keep breathing." He pushes Walker off the tower onto the bridge. "Run motherfucker!" he shouts.

Adams wants to die. Worse, he wants the 33rd to kill him. He *needs* the

33rd to kill him. It's the only way he can possibly find any kind of justification/redemption for his actions.

Control is given back to me as Walker falls onto the path below. I push forward and make Walker run as explosions shake the camera behind me. I don't look back. I *can't* look back. The camera is locked behind Walker, looking forward at the tower and Konrad. As Adams is destroyed behind me, Walker's only concern is moving forward, always moving forward. The explosions I'm not allowed to turn around and see paint long shadows of Walker ahead of him.

A final explosion knocks Walker off his feet.

"You knew it would end this way, Walker," says Konrad. "Your friends dead. The world on fire. And you… alone. You are a failure. Finally, something we have in common."

Walker stands and vomits off the edge of the bridge. A broken man at last.

As I make him walk up the red carpet into the Burj Kalifa, not even bothering to find a weapon, The camera zooms up close to his face (briefly panning over the walkie-talkie still attached to Walker's back). His flesh is hardly visible on the left side, covered in gashes and bruises and blood and dirt. The right side, meanwhile, is a pitch-black burn.

How the mighty have fallen.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WELCOME

Most games end with a bang.

The player, typically, deserves a reward for getting this far. For all the things they achieved in the game, for all the time they put into it, they deserve a bang. Maybe it is a (well-intended but terribly designed) boss battle. Maybe an incredibly bombastic cut scene. Something. Anything. A game has to end with a bang.

The Line doesn't end with a bang. It peters out like the old car you bought off your parents. Like the computer that takes fifteen minutes to boot up that you really should've replaced years ago. Like the friendship that never really ended but just kind of drifted off for one reason or another. *The Line* ends with a hollow victory. Walker has defeated the 33rd; he won, and he lost. He is a pathetic, broken mess of a man who has achieved nothing and, likewise, neither has the player. There will be no boss battle. No valiant final battle to prove his worth. No dramatic escape from Dubai. Even the game's soon-to-be-revealed twist of Konrad being dead all this time doesn't create a bang so much as emphasise the futility of everything I've done. In the end, there is just an injured, broken, pathetic man stubbornly crawling towards an objective he refuses to let go of… and his playable character.

The chapter title drives home this anticlimax: 'welcome'. On one hand, it's what the host (in this case Konrad) would say to a visiting, invited friend. It potentially rubs in that I was never really fighting towards someone who wanted to get rid of me, but was merely answering someone's summons. It also cheats me of the ending I feel I deserve simply for going through the actions and getting to the end of the game. 'Welcome' is what you say at the beginning, at the start. *The Line* doesn't end with a bang. It ends with a beginning.

*

In the foyer of the Burj Kalifa, the walls of each side of the corridor are aquariums, stretching to the ceiling. Walker doesn't comment on it, but I can't help but think back to the Aquarium Coliseum and the water we stole, the water that apparently wiped out the city in its absence. Does Konrad still have his own private supply?

The other thing it makes me think of is *Bioshock*. In a sense, this final scene is the equivalent to when I confronted Andrew Ryan in *Bioshock* (in the scene that, really, should have been the end of that game). *Bioshock*'s protagonist (alongside the player) was under the impression that he was choosing to move forward, choosing to complete the game's objectives, Andrew Ryan showed the player with Ryan's own death that the player was just a tool, mindlessly doing anything he was ordered to do with the phase "Would you kindly." The scene (and *Bioshock* generally) gets a lot of slack from modern game critics sick of undergrad blogs about it, but it remains one of the most powerful scenes in a game of recent years. As I sat there with a controller in my hand, unable to intervene as my character smashed Ryan to death with a golf club, I distinctly remember realising: "I have never—*never*—made a choice in a videogame. Not ever."

The Line delivers what is almost a post-*Bioshock* commentary about videogames. That is, a commentary that only works because of the previous commentary *Bioshock* itself made. Whereas *Bioshock*'s protagonist mistakenly thought he had a choice, Walker mistakenly thought he did not. As long as Walker stayed in Dubai, it was true that he didn't have a choice. But could've he just left Dubai? As long as I played *The Line* or *Bioshock,* I didn't have a choice, but could've I just stopped playing the game? Unlike Rapture, Dubai is not at the bottom of the ocean. It is a system and a society that Walker can walk away from. "There's always a choice," Lugo once said. Perhaps not. But, at the very least, we have a *responsibility.* I may not have always had a choice in my actions in *The Line*, but I was still responsible for being present in those choice-less situations. Or, put another way, what I chose to do doesn't matter so much as what I did.

I start moving Walker down the corridor. He walks slowly, limping. He doesn't have a weapon; his arms just slump by his side. He is defeated in victory.

Ahead, the silhouette of a man comes into view through that mist-like fog that sometimes separates areas in this game. He calls his men to stand at attention.

As I approach he says, "Captain Walker, we are all that is left of the 33rd. We surrender, sir. Dubai is yours."

There is a lot to unpack in this one line. *We are all that is left of the 33rd*. This is, at once, confusing and gut-dropping. It tells me that I have killed *everyone*. The dozen or so men currently saluting me are the only men of the 33rd I have not killed. It is also confusing because of the battalion that attacked Adams outside. What happened to them? There is something

surreal about these men just standing here saluting me when they could clearly, easily kill me. That is even more surreal in relation to the claim that they are *everyone*. How can that be? Surely I didn't kill *everyone*.

We surrender, sir. Dubai is yours. Why surrender to me? Because they are terrified of me? I have no gun, half my face is burned off, but I am a monster to fear. So they surrender. And Dubai is mine? Did I ever want Dubai to be mine? I was trying to help the city, not capture it. Wasn't I?

Walker, however, cares for none of this. There is only one thing on his mind. Konrad. "Where. Is. Konrad?" he demands through his teeth.

"Where he's always been," the squadron leader responds matter-of-factly. "Upstairs. He's waiting for you."

Konrad is upstairs, where he has always been. The double-meaning here is clear: Konrad has always been at the top of the Burj Kalifa but, really, he has always been upstairs in Walker's own mind.

I spend a while looking at the soldiers. None of them make eye contact with me. They just stand perfectly still, looking straight ahead. It is worth noting that they all look different. There is not a single repeated character model in this room. This one time that I am likely to stop and pay close attention to 33rd men, the game ensures they all look different. Each of these men is an individual man. A human. Not just repeated clumps of polygons.

*

I enter the lift that will take me to the top of the tower, taking Walker all the way back up from the dirt to the sky one final time. The last time he was on a rooftop was Walker's personal highest (and most deluded) point in the game. This time, it feels more like an ascension. Like Walker and I are leaving the earth behind and floating off to, well, not to heaven, but to somewhere unreal. We just walked up the red carpet, pressed a button on an elevator, and up we went.

At this final ascension, Walker has been in Dubai for three days and three nights—the same length of time (depending on which version of the Bible you read) that Jesus was dead for between his crucifixion and resurrection. It's most probably a coincidence (three is a very popular number, after all) but it is an interesting parallel, regardless. Walker is a playable character, a

god-like character in the word he inhabits, and the days he spends in Dubai are a kind of purgatory for him, a limbo between lives.

Walker slumps against a wall in the elevator, a cut scene showing his many injuries, the memories of his journey and crimes across Dubai etched into his skin.

In his earpiece, Konrad congratulates Walker for doing what the storm could not: destroying the Damned 33rd. He echoes one of the loading screen messages of the last couple of chapters: "Do you feel like a hero yet?"

I have done what was expected of me by this game and, here at the conclusion, I expect my reward. My cut scene. My ten thousand points. My unlocked secrets. But no, instead I get judged. I killed everyone. I'm a terrible person. Congratulations.

I also don't think it is a coincidence that Konrad echoes words from a loading screen message. The dissonances are starting to break down, all collapse in on themselves. Konrad is Walker is the player is the game is Konrad is Walker.

The lift door opens and Walker steps out into the same penthouse suite that we saw right at the start of the game, where Konrad got ready for his day. Konrad asks Walker if he thinks what Konrad had done to Dubai was the work of a madman. Walker admits he did indeed think Konrad was insane. Or, at least, he *hoped* Konrad was insane.

Why would he hope Konrad was insane? When someone does something 'crazy', you hope they are insane because if they are not insane, then the only conclusions left to make is that human nature itself is insane. If a sane human can do what Konrad and the 33rd did to Dubai, what Walker did to the 33rd, what Adams and Lugo did while following Walker, what the refugees did to Lugo, what I do unthinkingly every time I sit down to play a videogame, what does that say about humans? I have seen other players comment incredulously that it makes no sense that Adams and Lugo would follow Walker, who is clearly insane, across Dubai. Such a question assumes that Walker is insane and not, simply, human. Konrad assures Walker that Konrad is as sane as Walker is. But that isn't comforting to us as players. We need to *hope* Walker is insane just as he needs to hope Konrad is insane. The idea that Walker is sane is terrifying to us. The idea that Konrad is sane is terrifying to Walker.

On my first game, I walk off the lift, turn left, and walk straight ahead as Konrad and Walker talk to each other. Instead of heading up the stairs on my left to the mezzanine, I walk straight on through a door into a bathroom. It's a deeply ingrained behaviour for me: I always fully explore the floor I am on before I head up or down any stairs. The dialogue, the spatiality of the penthouse, and Walker's walking speed blend so that at the *exact* moment that Konrad is saying "I'm as sane as you are" to Walker, I am looking at myself (that is, at Walker) in a bathroom mirror. Whereas my reflection on the targeting computer was vague at best, here there is nothing but me. I can see the burns, the cuts, the gaping hole in my shirt where a buckshot has exposed my torso armour. This is what a sane man looks like.

I look at my reflection for some time. I have looked at the back of Walker's head for the entire game, and I've seen the front of it enough in cut scenes and every time I am in cover. But looking in the mirror now, I am reminded of just how clean cut he was when I first entered Dubai with his squad. The change was so slow, so gradual, that I never really noticed the changes until he was changed. Like a continent quietly shifting across an ocean, the layers were peeled back from Walker's flesh ever so gradually until here, looking in the mirror, the continent smashes into another one and I realise I was in fact moving all along. There was no point when Walker wasn't changing

"*I'm* upstairs Walker."

When Konrad says this, I snap back, remembering myself. Maybe I imagined the emphasise on *'I'm*'. At this point of my first game, not knowing what awaited me upstairs, the thematic emphasis was clear: after all this time, it is Walker who has become the real Kurtz here.

*

There are also stairs that you can go up on the far side of the penthouse, to another mezzanine above the lift. I missed this platform on my first game, but found the game's final piece of intel here on a later game. A poem, written by Konrad, called "Poem for Elizabeth":

> *I've been forgetting when I am. / You should know, / You're always there.*
> *I keep repeating, / The next time, time next time. / You won't.*
> *I hate this lie the most. / Mostly I just hate / The want.*

It's an abstract poem, and I don't quite know what to think of it. I don't know what to make of the name 'Elizabeth'—perhaps it is meaningless beyond the significance that Konrad has someone special to him back home?

The focus of the poem is temporality. "I've been forgetting *when* I am… I keep repeating." It suggests Konrad has found himself trapped in a temporal loop, a kind of Groundhog Day repeating over and over. What is the 'lie' that he hates the most? What is the 'want'?

There is an interpretation of the game I thought over when I read this poem. The easiest understanding of the game is that Konrad is a figment of Walker's imagination, built up from Walker's memories and his need to distance himself from his crimes. But what if, in fact, Walker is a figment of Konrad's memories? A creature built up from the memories of someone Konrad served with back in Kabul that he can place the blame on for his own crimes. Perhaps that is the lie he is living over and over, and Walker is Konrad's ghost, constantly living this loop of betraying his own men until he kills himself on the deck.

For most of my first play of the game, I thought the name 'Konrad' was far too predictable. Too blatant a nod to *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. But I realised, quite a way into the game, that I had made a mistake. I was confusing *Heart of Darkness*'s author—Joseph Conrad—with the antagonist

Kurtz. Konrad, really, is a hybrid of Conrad and Kurtz. He is the Kurtz-like character, the one that descended into the heart of darkness of man, but he is also Conrad, the one who narrates and *creates* the story. Is Konrad both the creator and the antagonist of Walker's existence?

I posed a shorter version of this theory to David Wildgoose on Twitter. I said, "Idea: maybe Walker is a figment of Konrad's imagination?" Without missing a beat, Wildgoose replied, "They are both figments of the player's imagination."

*

I walk up the stairs to where Konrad, with his back to me, is painting a picture. I walk over the Japanese sand garden, leaving footsteps across its perfectly raked patterns before the cut scene starts, literally crossing several lines with each step.

"No matter how hard I tried, I never could escape the reality of what happened here. *That* was my downfall," says Konrad.

He is painting an image right out of Walker's mind—the woman and child dead from the white phosphorous attack at the gate. The scene that was scarred onto Walker's mind. And, it appears, was scarred onto my own mind, too, judging from how quickly I recognise it. The game has not once shown this image since Walker first took it in—the game has hardly alluded to the white phosphorous attack at all—but I know exactly what it is the second I see it.

Also telling is that Konrad is creating a painting of what is in Walker's mind. It is not a perfect recreation of what happened, but an expressive representation of how Walker remembers it. Paintings, just like videogames, are subjective, and might not look exactly like the objective thing they represent. In this cut scene we are starting to realise—as the many hallucinations through the game suggested—that the Dubai we just walked through was, perhaps, not how post-sandstorm Dubai 'actually' looked. Just like this painting, with its dramatic lines, blurs, and colours, the Dubai we saw was just a representation born from Walker's memory, perceived through Walker's body.

Konrad adds a final stroke to the painting, steps back to admire it, and says he hopes Walker likes it. Understandably, Walker responds: "What the hell is going on?"

The camera is quite close to Konrad's face. The flesh is clean. Unbroken. There are no scars or dirt or chunks of flesh missing. As the camera pans around, Walker comes into view. He is covered in dirt and sweat; half his face is black. The contrast is undeniable. It is Walker who has sunk, not Konrad—at least, not this Konrad.

Konrad tells Walker that Walker's eyes are opening for the first time. Walker looks at the painting before saying, "You did this."

"No," Konrad replies. "You did. 47 civilians are dead because of you."

47. That's an exact number. It's not "30 to 40" it's 47. An exact number of people dead at my hands.

Konrad tells Walker someone has to pay for his crimes, and walks behind the canvas of the painting. Control is returned to me. I follow Konrad, but he has disappeared. He walked back into my mind by walking behind this image drawn out of it.

Out on the balcony is a body in a chair.

"John? Is that you?" Walker asks, using Konrad's first name like they are old friends, like the conventions of war and militaries just don't matter anymore.

"You tell me," replies Konrad's voice, once again omniscient and disembodied.

This whole scene, this whole final encounter of Walker and Konrad, is Konrad trying to do to Walker what happened to Konrad. When Konrad said that not being able to escape the *reality* of what happened in Dubai was

his downfall, he implies that he would have survived for as long as he didn't face reality, for as long as he lived in a dream world where he could justify his actions. It is that dream world that Walker has been living in for the whole game. Here, at last, Konrad is going to try to force Walker to face the reality of what he has done. If he can do that, his downfall will also be Walker's.

Similarly, this whole cut scene—and in some ways, the entire game—is Konrad trying to have Walker see that Konrad exists only in his head, using increasingly obvious hints until, at last, he says it outright. Walker has to realise what actually happened here, what he actually did, and he has to take responsibility for his actions if there is any hope for him.

Walker approaches the chair and spins it around, revealing Konrad's dead, decomposing body. KONRAD, it reads on the breast pocket of the military dress uniform. In his hand is a pistol that Walker takes. Konrad, it seems, killed himself some time ago.

But living, out-of-uniform Konrad appears again, stepping out from behind Walker much like he stepped behind the canvas. He is popping in and out of Walker's mind—from upstairs, where he has been all along. As Konrad appears, the world disappears, leaving Walker, Konrad, and Konrad's corpse on a backdrop of blackness. We have stepped away from the world, into Walker's mind. There is nothing here but Walker and Konrad.

Walker questions how this is possible.

"Not how," says Konrad. "*Why*."

Konrad reminds Walker—reminds me—that we were never meant to come here in the first place. A flashback to the start of the game shows Walker repeating their orders to the rest of Delta: they were meant to just find traces of survivors, radio for evac, and the cavalry would come in. I remember when Walker said this. I remember when Walker still looked like that. The contrast between that Walker, having just stepped into Dubai, right next to the broken man he is now is absolutely jarring.

Despite the obvious, despite the words of what they were *meant* to do coming out of Walker's own mouth, he insists that what happened here was out of his control.

"None of this would've happened," Konrad responds. "If you had just *stopped*."

But Walker couldn't stop. And neither could I.

Another flashback, this time a montage, shows the emptiness of Walker's claims. So many choices he made as he trekked into the city (some of which I had a hand in) while, all the time, stressing that he had no choice. It's particularly telling how all the 'choices' Walker made (and, by extension, which I made) are not simply the binary choices that the game highlighted, but every single step we both took forward.

"We tried to save you," Walker insists.

"You're no saviour," responds Konrad. "Your talents lie elsewhere," he says snidely as a montage of my choices to murder different people flash by. These various flashbacks paint a fuller picture of just what Walker achieved in Dubai: good intentions ending violently.

Konrad is sounding incredibly smug for someone who, in all the intel I have found, in the transmission at the start of the game, seemed like a broken man. I guess that is because this version of Konrad is simply Walker's interpretation of Konrad (or Konrad's interpretation of Walker's interpretation of Konrad). Konrad can tell Walker how broken he has become because Konrad himself broke in the same way, and now Walker is holding the very same gun Konrad used on himself.

The scene goes back to Walker and Konrad looking at each other with Konrad's actual, dead body in the middle.

"This wasn't my fault," Walker says again, but with less conviction.

Living Konrad disappears in a flash, but his voice says one of the key lines in the game: "It takes a strong man to deny what is right in front of him."

While this line is being said in Konrad's voice, Walker's own lips are moving, mouthing the words. While, right in front of Walker, is Konrad's dead body. That is the most obvious meaning of the words: that Konrad has been dead all this time and Konrad's voice has been coming out of Walker. But beyond that, so much of the game has been Walker denying so much. A strong man indeed. Not being able to escape reality was Konrad's downfall; denying the reality all around him—all around me—has been Walker's greatest strength.

Even when the truth is undeniable, Konrad explains, Walker creates his own.

"The truth is, Walker, you are here because you want to feel like something you're not: a hero," says Konrad. "I'm here because you can't accept what you've done. And it broke you."

More flashbacks show that Walker indeed made up the walkie-talkie and the choice of the hanging prisoners. The walkie-talkie's guts had been pulled out, and the hanging prisoners were actually corpses—if we can trust this cut scene more than the previous ones, that is. After the white phosphorous attack, Walker created Konrad, and now his creation is getting the better of him.

But Konrad's words may as well be spat right at the player who enjoys playing shooters: "you are here because you want to feel like something you're not: a hero." And it's true, even those of us who find shooters highly problematic even as we enjoy them, we are playing them, on some level, because we enjoy feeling powerful, and we justify feeling powerful by, in most cases, being the good guy and doing good guy things. But the very fact that what we enjoy is being powerful enough to perform acts of gratuitous violence inherently means that we are *not* heroes. We are monsters.

While this conversation is, undoubtedly, the thematic climax of the game's narrative, it is important to stress that at no point does Konrad tell Walker what he did was wrong. Konrad tells Walker that "all this" happened because Walker didn't stop walking, but he never outright says that "all this" is bad. Similarly, *The Line* is never trying to tell the player that military shooters are 'bad' *per se*, or that we are bad people if we enjoy playing them. Instead, it is simply trying to make us acknowledge our own complicity and responsibility when we choose to play them. What happens in military shooters happens because we play them. And, yes, because someone makes them, but that doesn't

change the fact that what happens in each military shooter I play unfolds explicitly because I play them. I could've stopped at any time, just like Walker. I'm not 'bad' because I didn't stop, but that doesn't make me less complicit in the violent events that unfolded. It's not wrong to enjoy playing military shooters, but just what that 'enjoyment' entails is a hard truth we often avoid.

Konrad and Walker walk up to a glass wall with their reflections looking back at them. I can't tell if this glass wall actually exists anywhere in Konrad's penthouse. At first I thought they had gone back inside. But, when I look closely, I can still see the red sky and burning remains of Dubai blurred past their reflections.

The music in this scene is a slow and steady build-up of guitars that commences the moment Konrad steps out from behind Walker. It's gradual building of volume perfectly matches my own dawning realisation of just what I have done in Dubai. Sure, I knew Walker wasn't a 'good guy' for quite some time, but the fact I had so blatantly disobeyed orders and kept going just that bit further because I "didn't have a choice" had completely passed me by. Just how complicit I was in all of this finally hit home as the guitars grew louder and louder.

And now Walker and Konrad are looking at each other's reflections in the glass and Konrad is pointing a pistol at me and he is telling me that I have to make a choice, here and now, and the guitars are reaching their climax. He is going to count to five, and then pull the trigger. Walker can no longer say he has no choice. Konrad is standing there, telling him that he *must* decide. I feel like I've been put on the spot very suddenly. It is incredibly unnerving. "We can't live this lie forever," Konrad says

But what am I choosing? Konrad is a figment of my imagination, right? But this figment's reflection is pointing a pistol that is in Walker's own hand at Walker's head (I had almost forgotten than Walker had even taken Konrad's gun out of his cold, dead hand). I have to make a choice for once but the choice I am making is unclear. I want to deny what I am seeing.

"This is all in my head," Walker tries to assure himself.

"Are you sure?" Konrad teases. "Maybe it is in mine?"

Ha! This certainly helps my "Walker is a figment of Konrad's imagination" reading. But I am not thinking about that right now. I am thinking that I want this to stop. I want it to pause. I need more time to make this decision but Konrad is already counting down.

ONE

Walker still insists that this wasn't his own fault. "This was *your* fault" he insists, momentarily waving the pistol in his hand at Konrad before lowering it again.

"If that is what you believe then shoot me," says Konrad.

That is what 'choice' I am making here. Walker's and Konrad's reflections are, again, an allusion not to Walker but something beyond Walker: me, the player. Do I really think what happened here isn't my fault? Well then I should just shoot Konrad because he is the bad guy. That is the choice here. Not between Walker and Konrad. But between me and the game. Am I okay with what the game has now shown me I have done? It was entrapment, to be sure, but I still did it.

TWO

Walker's eyes are wide and black. He quietly, pathetically, sadly insists, "I never meant to hurt anybody." His voice is so broken as to be tragic. I almost pity him.

Konrad assures Walker in an almost friendly voice that "No one ever does". But he doesn't let up.

THREE

At last, control is given to me, the player. I say 'at last' but I didn't want it. I don't want this choice to be on me because this choice is about me. It is here, pointing a gun at my own reflection that I am looking into my own heart of darkness. The gun is pointing at Konrad and I can shoot him because he is the bad guy and this is all his fault, right?

FOUR

But I can turn the gun to point at my own reflection. But when I do, my reflection does not point it back at me. Walker's reflection sticks the pistol into the side of his own face. His eyes squeezed shut, not wanting what has to happen.

If I kill Walker, Walker kills Walker too. No bullet travels back to this side of the screen. Walker will pay for both his crimes and my crimes. Walker can choose suicide, but I can only choose murder. Still, I would be killing my virtual self. I would be accepting responsibility for what I have done to this world and its inhabitants. That seems like punishment enough.

FIVE

I don't end up making a choice before Konrad fires. I was so desperate to get all the facts before I made a choice that I ran out of time and the choice was made for me. Against a black background, a hand (I don't know if it is Walker's or Konrad's) drops the pistols and it shatters into a thousand pieces as though it is made of porcelain. "It takes a strong man to deny what's right in front of him," Konrad's voice repeats.

Ultimately, the one time I had to make a choice, an actual choice about myself, I failed to. I let Konrad make the choice for me. Or was not making a choice a choice in itself? Even though I made no choice and Konrad shot me, the cut scene shows that, in fact, Walker did shoot Konrad, despite my choice—despite my lack-of-any-choice.[7] By not turning the gun on myself, I

7. Since first publishing this book, it's been brought to my attention that I have made a mistake here. If you refuse to shoot Konrad here he does, in fact, kill Walker. I have written a blog post to correct this and to discuss what it means that I made this mistake at:
http://critdamage.blogspot.com.au/2012/11/killing-is-harmless-correction.html

refused responsibility and thus, even if I didn't take the shot, Konrad paid for my crimes. Just like the 33rd had been doing for the entire game as Walker refused his own responsibility.

"Stronger than you," Walker responds to Konrad.

MASH's Colonel Flagg, who I mentioned earlier, had this incredibly ability to make boasts that, if you read into them, are actually insults of himself. Here, where Walker says he is stronger than Konrad, all he is really saying is that he is more able to deny what is right in front of him than Konrad can. As a videogame player that refuses to shoot my own avatar, that refuses to acknowledge my own complicity in these virtual crimes, maybe I too am stronger than Konrad.

"You keep telling yourself that," says Konrad.

Konrad is looking at his chest as though he has been shot, but there is no blood. Instead, he begins to slowly shatter like a pane of glass, as though I have tried to shoot a spectre on the other side of a television screen. As though to say that by putting all of this on Konrad, I have offloaded my responsibilities on someone who never really existed. As he crumbles, Konrad tells Walker that whatever happens next, he should not be too hard on himself. "Even

now, after all you've done, you can still go home. Lucky you."

The underlying message is clear: "You are a criminal and a murderer, but you can get out of it without punishment." Like the videogame player aiming a white phosphorous mortar from the safety of their lounge room. Or the drone pilot who bombs a wedding on the other side of the world then returns home to his family every night. Walker can just walk away.

Walker looks over the balcony, much as Konrad did at the very start of the game. Behind him appears a 33rd soldier, requesting orders. Walker says "We complete our missions" and the soldier asks what that mission is. Even Walker doesn't know. He just snaps at the soldier to get him a radio, but the soldier has disappeared.

Walker is still insane. Killing Konrad hasn't saved him. Now he's just trapped in this limbo Dubai hell, alone, determined to keep on going but unable to deny the truth anymore. I feel similarly. I still want to play shooters, but I've been forced to see what my actions in shooters are really signifying. Where does that leave me?

He has no radio, but Walker speaks as though he is requesting an evacuation as the screen fades out. At last, after everything he has done, he is doing what he should have done five minutes in the game: leaving Dubai. The scene mirrors how the game opens. Looking over the same vista of Dubai, except now it is dark and burning. Walker's words mimic the distress signal we heard at that time that brought us here in the first place. "Survivors: one too many" he finishes. Someone survived who, really, did not deserve to be alive.

*

But of course, there is another ending. I could have placed that gun under Walker's mouth and shot a bullet through his head. This ending is what I can't help but think of not as the 'right' ending but, maybe, the most *honest* ending. To make Walker shoot himself is to come to terms with the reality of what Walker did here, and what I did through Walker. Killing Konrad achieves nothing other than revealing him as the fabrication that he was—it doesn't even end the game as Walker must go on to the epilogue and choose one of three further possible endings. But if Walker—the player—

kills himself, it simply ends everything here. Done. Finished. It is a choice that says, "I have sinned, and I should put an end to this right now." The epilogues, on the other hand, continue like the rest of the game: just going on because I have refused to let go.

On my second game, when I take responsibility for what I have done and shoot Walker, the camera pans up across the penthouse and onto the balcony. Noticeably, the canvas and painting are no longer there, as though signifying that this perspective is *real*. We are no longer prisoner to Walker's skewed subjectivity. We are seeing objective reality. Konrad is slumped in his chair, dead as he has always been. And, beside him, is Walker, equally dead. Walker didn't shatter like glass from the bullet; he actually died. The corpses beside each other suggest that Walker followed in Konrad's footsteps. The pilgrimage of a once-sane man coming to terms with his true nature. If it takes a strong man to deny what is right in front of him, what kind of man actually *accepts* what is behind him? Maybe a righteous man.

The original transmission that sent Delta on this trip into hell plays. Konrad, then, gets the final say in this interpretation of the game. Not even Konrad, but the ghost of Konrad, recorded for eternity. With the camera, Konrad's ghost floats over Konrad's corpse and then Walker's before drifting out over the burning ruins of Dubai. Maybe it is waiting for the next Delta team that it will haunt.

Maybe it's just waiting for me to inevitably choose 'New Game' again—either in *The Line* or the next game I play; does it even matter?—and put myself through this all over again, as though I haven't learned a thing. I am not a righteous man, and on my first game, I did not shoot Walker. As I had done for fifteen chapters, I refused to make a choice, and the game goes on.

EPILOGUE

In all, *The Line* has four possible endings. One of those is the definitive and conclusive ending of the player making Walker shoot himself in the head. If Walker and the player actually, for once, make a definitive choice and take responsibility for their actions, the game just ends. But if they continue to be strong and deny what is right in front of them—as I did when I didn't make a choice before Konrad fired—an epilogue with three other possible endings will happen after the credits. The player doesn't get off that easy.

But first, let's talk about the credits, over which plays Jimi Hendrix's "1983 (A Merman I Should Turn To Be)". This song gives the game a cyclic tone. Much like the way the game ends with Konrad and Walker on the same balcony that Konrad stood on alone at the beginning of the game, it ends with a Jimi Hendrix song just as it started with one. The menu screen, when I first loaded up the game, started with Jimi Hendrix's ode to America, and here is his thirteen minute lament of war and bombs and the worst of all

mankind and, finally, finding a respite under the sea in the sunken city of Atlantis. In this song, the narrator has to go somewhere that has been destroyed to find his respite, to find a place he could live how he wanted to live. So too did Walker have to come to Dubai to become what, deep down, he always was.

But as Konrad foresaw, Walker can still go home, even after all he did.

As I've already said, I don't think *The Line* has a 'right' ending. Each of the endings is thematically consistent with the game. Each is a reflection of how the game impacted the player that makes (or doesn't make) those decisions. Each is a choice that I can imagine Walker making. Each is a choice that I feel like I could've made. In fact, I think *The Line* is one of those games where the 'right' ending is *all* the endings. This is something I have previously said about *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Bastion*. In both these games, I didn't feel like I had seen the 'complete' conclusion until I had seen the different ways history could go—first by not letting go of the past and then embracing the future. In *Grand Theft Auto IV*, it wasn't until I made one decision and lost someone I loved, and then played again, made a different decision, and lost someone else that I also loved that the full futility and tragedy of Niko's situation hit home. In *Bastion*, I chose to rebuild in my first game, refusing to let go of the past. In the second game, I chose to leave the past behind, destroying what was left of it as we launched the Bastion into the sky. Letting go felt all the more powerful the second time because I had not let go the first time. In both these games, as in *The Line*, the 'true' meaning of the game's conclusion didn't really hit me until I had experienced each of the endings.[89]

I

In *The Line*, the first ending I achieved felt not so much like the wrong ending, but perhaps like the most disappointing ending. Not that the ending itself was disappointing, mind—but it made me disappointed with myself. It felt like the ending the game expected me to get because it knew I was too weak to choose any other ending. This is the ending you get if you never, not

8. I wrote about how the endings of *Bastion* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* affected me in more detail here: http://critdamage.blogspot.com.au/2011/07/bastion-review-and-some-further.html

9. Interestingly, Nick Dinicola also compares *The Line*'s ending with *Bastion* and *Grand Theft Auto IV*: http://www.popmatters.com/pm/post/161989-spec-opps/

even at the end, make any choice. It is the ending you get if you never, not even in the end, take any responsibility. Conversely, it is the best possible ending for Walker, which just makes our cowardice stand out even more. Neither Walker nor I deserved the ending we received.

That ending is going home. The epilogue opens with US humvees driving over the dunes and ruins of Dubai up to the steps of the Burj Khalifa where Walker sits. He has a beard now, and his wounds are bandaged, reflecting that some time has passed since the night atop the penthouse. Most notably, he is wearing Konrad's jacket. Walker may not have been able to admit responsibility for what happened in Dubai, but he can admit what he has become—what he always was. Walker has become Konrad. All his layers have been pulled back.

As the humvees pull to a stop and the troops step out, Walker stands up and shuffles forward. He is armed, holding a powerful AA12 rifle.

The lead US soldier says on his radio, "I think we found him." And then addresses Walker, "Captain Walker."

These men were sent here to find Walker.

As the lead soldier shuffles forward, control is given to me. This is not what I was expecting. I did not expect to have to make more choices—or to have to avoid making yet another choice. I can't walk, but I can aim my weapon. I can probably fire, too, killing these US soldiers. They're not 33rd; the 33rd are dead. But they are still just NPCs. Why not kill them?

One of the many soldiers with a rifle aimed at me notes that I am armed, that I am not complying to the orders to put my weapon down. The leader insists that I am shell-shocked and, probably, I am. I've probably been shell-shocked ever since the gate, if not before then. This man is trying to save my life. He is being so very understanding of what Walker is going through.

The command to press A to DROP WEAPON appears, but I don't do it. I don't do anything. Eventually, the soldier gets close enough and, gently, takes it away. Just like in the tower with Konrad, I refused to make the decision myself. A final cut scene plays. Walker seems to sigh and lowers the weapon. As the troop steps forward and removes it from him, Walker mutters, "It's over." And, as he is helped into the humvee: "Time to go home."

This is the best Walker could've hoped for, going home, as Konrad pointed out to him. But is it what he deserved? Is it what I deserved?

As they drive out of Dubai, the driver of the humvee alludes to the horrific things they saw in Dubai while trying to find him. He asks Walker how he survived all this. At first, it sounds like he is going to suspect Walker of less-than-noble actions. But instead, he seems to respect Captain Walker for getting through it. As though there was anything commendable about what Walker did here—about what I did here. The soldier's pride for me is sickening, like salt in the wound that is my continued existence. He asks Walker how he survived.

"Who said I did?" says Walker, and closes his eyes against the tears.

In this way, *The Line*'s epilogue works to make me feel pathetic. I made the 'wrong' choice by denying that I had any responsibility for what happened in this game, by denying culpability and not shooting Walker on the balcony. And now the game gave me *one last chance* to accept my complicity. One last chance to admit who I am (what I am), to open fire on more US troops, and end it. Instead, I chose the coward's way out. I chose to not make a choice. I chose to go home, where soldiers will reverently ask me how I got through such an ordeal alive. I got through it by being strong. By denying what was right in front of me. By telling myself that simply because it was all in a videogame, that none of this violence meant anything. But, really, I'm not so sure any more. That is the lasting legacy of *The Line* for me: my virtual actions matter far more than I am willing to take responsible for. What happened in Dubai didn't stay in Dubai.

II

I play through the entire game again and, again, I refuse to shoot Walker dead. Again I am on the steps of the Burj Khalifa as the US troops find me. This time I shoot the nice leader trying to spare my life in the head, and his men gun me down.

As Walker lies there, flinching and dying, the omniscient camera is back. It drifts above Walker's dying face, slowly lifting up into the sky. Like Walker's sprit is ascending to heaven. I hear Walker's disembodied voice, addressing Konrad. He calls him 'John' as now they are one and the same and official titles don't really matter anymore. He says:

> *Remember back in Kabul, John? Before things got bad? We were talking. About nothing, really. I said something about going home and you said*

And then Konrad's voice closes off this ending (interestingly, Konrad gets the last word in each ending that ends with Walker's death):

> *Home? Huh. We can't go home. There's a line men like us have to cross. If we're lucky we do what is necessary and then we die. Home? All I really want, Captain, is peace.*

This is a powerful dialogue. If Walker shooting himself in the head was the righteous ending, then this ending is redemption. Walker was not ready to make a choice up at the penthouse; he was not ready to kill himself. But by this stage he can admit not who he had become, but what he had always been. Similarly, the player has had the entire credits to think about things and, maybe, will rethink their choice to not die. In fact, the tone of Konrad's voice as he says this line is one of understanding. He knows it wasn't easy for Walker and the player to come to this understanding. There's no hard feelings.

The 'peace' Konrad alludes to is death. A line is crossed by men who go to war. They see the darkness in the heart of man, and the only peace they can hope for is death in combat. Or, so Konrad sees it.

Here, we see clearly why going home on my first game felt like I had failed. Going home is not what Walker needed. It's not what I needed. What we both needed was peace. We needed to come to terms with just what we had done in the process of walking through Dubai/playing this game. Paradoxically, we found that peace by opening fire on human beings one last time—only this time we let them win.

III

I assumed that was that. I had seen all three endings. It was not until Twitter assured me there was a *fourth* possible ending that I tried to actually defeat the US soldiers.

I expected it would just be the four or so soldiers surrounding me that I would have to fight when I, again, shot the comforting soldier in the face and ran for cover. But more reinforcements came. And more. I could not just quickly take them all down. I had to *try* to kill them. I had to take cover, strategically move forward, and be methodical in my killing of these US soldiers. *The Line* does not give up this final ending lightly. If you want it, you have to fight for it.

Even if you want it, you could still die and find the redemption and peace you didn't want. You have to earn it. You have to prove that even after everything, you still just want to slam your back against some cover and shoot some guys.

This is Walker's strongest ending and, as such, the one where he is at his most deluded. Walker doesn't give in, nor does he accept death, neither does he just put off making choices and get to go home. In this epilogue, Walker actively chooses to continue to make choices without taking responsibility. He chooses to embrace what he has become and defend Dubai as his own. Likewise, I guess I embraced it, too. I was the one that reloaded that final checkpoint over and over, determined to kill all these US soldiers just to see what would happen. I hadn't finished the game yet, and I *needed* to finish it. That, I think, makes this the most terrifying ending of all.

I eventually made it, watching the final US troop that I had just gunned down gag on his own blood. Another squad is on the radio, demanding to know what is happening. Walker picks it up and talks into it:

"Gentlemen. Welcome to Dubai."

And so the game finally ends for me exactly how it starts. A squad of soldiers is out there somewhere in Dubai, and a madman is waiting for them—never mind the madmen in their own hearts.

Walker turns and heads back towards the tower as I get an achievement: "The Road To Glory."

It's ironic. Glory, here, is not at all a good thing. Walker and I refused to die, refused to do what was right. In my first epilogue ending, Walker went home with his tail between his legs. Here, he claims Dubai as his own, killing the outsiders and, truly, becoming a Kurtz in his own right. He's 'free'—free in the sense that he has successfully denied the reality of what happened here, and I feel all the more terrible because of it.

The Line does not have a good ending. All the endings combined show that no matter what happens in this game, you cannot save Walker. He is changed by what he goes through, and so am I. There is no going back to how Walker was before he entered Dubai, and there is no going back to how I was before I played *The Line*. It's not that I will stop playing shooters—as my determination to see this fourth ending at all costs reveals—but I will no longer be able to deny what I am truly doing in them. Killing for entertainment is harmless? I'm not so sure anymore.

AFTERWORD

As I return at last to the menu screen, the flag that has flown upside down for the last fifteen chapters is no longer flying, and no longer upside down. It is slumped on the ground, right way up. If at the start of the game the flying, inverted flag was a sign of both needing to be saved and rebelling against that saviour, this now signals both a death in peace and a return to the rightful order of things. If Walker is dead, he has found peace, no longer needs saving, and is no longer rebelling, and the flag can be lowered. If he has survived and returned to America, he has just gone back to living like nothing has happened. But either way, the Walker who first entered Dubai has not survived, and the flag slumps lifeless in the ruins.

And so ends *The Line*. But what did it all mean? Well, I don't find that a particularly interesting question. Many people think *The Line* is about how horrible war is, or how horrible military shooters are. I don't think that is so. For me, *The Line* isn't about statements or answers, but about questions.

Its theme is not one of criticising the military shooter, but simply critiquing it, asking questions about its nature. What is actually going on in these games that some of us play with reckless abandon, and which some of us dismiss outright? What do these games contribute to a broader culture of disassociated violence and dehumanised others? What does it mean that as these games increasingly depict war with more realism, reality itself increasingly begins to look like a videogame?

These are not the questions that *The Line* answers; they are the questions that *The Line* left me with. Through my complicity in Walker's descent into madness, I learned things about myself. Once I stood before Andrew Ryan in *Bioshock* and realised I had never before made a choice in a videogame, and absolved myself of all my sins. Now, I stood before my own reflection and realised that just because I had no choice, that didn't mean I had no responsibility over my actions. My sins are my own.

Maybe it seems like a copout to conclude 50,000 words with "it's complicated," but war, violence, videogames, humanity, everything truly is complex. And that is the beauty of *The Line*: it is complicated. Too many games—not to mention other media forms, critics, journalists, politicians, everybody and everything—want to find the nice and easy dichotomies. The good and the evil. The human and the other. The start and the end. The right and the wrong. *The Line* stubbornly refuses such dichotomies. There is good and evil in everyone. Every start is an ending, and every ending is a start. Every human is monstrous. Every right is a wrong. *The Line* refuses to give us a simple answer. Instead, it embraces contradictions to expose just how fraudulent simple answers are.

CRITICAL COMPILATION

SPEC OPS: THE LINE

Here I want to produce a critical compilation of what other things people are saying about *The Line*. While I suspect I have perhaps spent the most words on analysing this game, my own thoughts are far from the definitive, objective opinion on the game. Many journalists, critics, and bloggers said many different things about the game. Many thought it achieved something really special. Many thought it was just another mediocre shooter. Many thought it was *worse* than most shooters as it was pretending to be something better. So here I will try to draw together the main conversations that were had around *The Line*.

Needless to say, this list is far from exhaustive, and I am sure to miss something out there on the vast internet. If you think a piece deserves to be here, please email me at brendankeogh86@gmail.com. A public version of this list will be online at *Critical Distance*, and I will update it accordingly.

Also, I am indebted to Eric Swain for supplying many of the links below.

*

Often, some of the most succinct critical overviews of a game are made in the reviews. *Edge* thinks *The Line* has issues, but claims that it fires the first shots "in the battle for a smarter, morally cognizant shooter." At *Game Critics*, Brad Gallaway applauds the game for trying to do something special, but ultimately believes that it is held back by a rigid adherence to genre conventions. In a "Second Opinion" Corey Motley agrees, and goes so far to call out *The Line* for "cheap, bulls**t guilt tactics". *RockPaperShotgun*'s Alec Meer is largely positive about the game. Or, perhaps, is positive about how negative the game made him feel.

Surprisingly, where one would expect the most negative reaction to *The Line*, it receives a somewhat insightful and introspective look from *Zero Punctuation*'s Yahtzee Croshaw. In between his obligatory crass jokes,

Croshaw makes several interesting musings on whether or not a shooter has to be 'fun'. Similarly, *Penny Arcade* has a two-part video review that looks in-depth at just how *The Line* works, what it says about PTSD, and how the mechanics intentionally make you feel uncomfortable.

Indeed, many people did feel uncomfortable when they played *The Line*, and many people thought it was a better game because of this. Not only does *The Line* make us feel terrible for what we do while we play it, but it can make every violent act we have committed in videogames up to this point feel equally terrible. Bruno Dion at *Medium Difficulty* looks at how *The Line* makes virtual killing feel bad in a way few games bother to make it feel. Nick Dinicola, meanwhile, discusses how *The Line* shames his happy, violent memories of videogames past, and in another post discusses The Line's endings in more detail. Brandon Karratti, too, retrospectively reconsidered the many virtual murders he committed once he played *The Line*. Richard Cobbett thinks *The Line* tries to make us feel guilty by association, but believes other games have done this better.

Back at *Medium Difficulty*, Karl Parakenings felt terrible when he played *The Line* for an entirely different reason: because he hated it, claiming that the game is "largely about the question of why one would spend money on a game which does its best to make you stop playing." Parakenings is certainly not the only critic who thinks the game fails at its message. Raymond Neilson agrees, and takes issue with various things that Walt Williams has said about the game in interviews. These two video essays, too, take issue with the apparent contradiction in what *The Line* is saying and how it is saying it.

At *Pixels or Death*, Patrick Lindsey argues that *The Line* can't be profound as long as it rigidly sticks to shooter conventions. David Sadd responds to Lindsey's piece, however, and argues that *The Line* works specifically because it plays with shooter conventions to tell a personal story.

Similarly, *Errant Signal*'s video essay on the game discusses how *The Line* can *only* deliver its messages through the most conventional mechanics, and how it plays off the player's expectation.

On the topic of whether or not *The Line* is 'won' by not playing it, Jim Ralph decides to call *The Line*'s bluff by not playing it, and finds this a particularly interesting way of engaging with a game.

One interesting aspect about *The Line* is how the characters evolve over the entire course of the game. At *The Escapist* Grant Howitt looks at how this

works in detail with comments from narrative designer Richard Pearsey. Blogger a_g, meanwhile, writes three posts as he plays the game, detailing his attachment (and increasing detachment) to the members of Delta squad as the game progresses.

On the question of just who the bad guys are in *The Line*, Bernardo Del Castillo doesn't think that is the right question to ask, and thinks *The Line* shows that 'good' and 'bad' are often just in the eye of the beholder.

Beyond its own story, *The Line* raises questions about just what shooters do and what our responsibilities are as the players of shooters. Tom Bissell uses *The Line* as a jumping off point to look at depictions of violence in recent videogames more broadly in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Shooter". Dan Golding notes that among all its themes, *The Line* is "most clearly an attack on videogames" and goes even further to say that it is "an attack on those of us who play and uncritically enjoy military shooters." However, Sparky Clarkson wonders just how critical *The Line* can be of the player's actions while simultaneously avoiding the question of just what the responsibility is of a developer that makes such games in the first place. Matthew Burns at *Magical Wasteland* similarly compares and contrasts *The Line* with *Modern Warfare 2*'s "No Russian" level, finding each wanting in the way they deliver their message to the player. Patrick Stafford, however, sees *The Line* as a crucial turning point for the shooter genre, and claims that *The Line* demands that shooters raise the bar. Anjin Anhut doesn't compare *The Line* to the shooter genre broadly, but to *Bioshock* specifically in his journey from Rapture to Dubai.

Various other writers dissected the game in great detail, or took elements or themes of the game and discussed those at great length. At *Twenty Sided*, Shamus Young and some companions have several long and detailed posts looking in-depth at various aspects of *The Line*. The first two posts break down the entire game, bit by bit. Another post looks more generally at *The Line*'s themes and how it conveys them, and another post looks in-depth at *The Line*'s visual art style. Similarly, Cameron Kunzelman found the game wanting, but celebrates the game's art direction.

Co-Op Critics break down *The Line* into a serious of thematic categories, and analyse each of these in turn. At *Unwinnable*, I look at *The Line*, *Mark of the Ninja*, and film *Inception* to look at how various videogames of late have depicted purely subjective worlds that we can never experience in any objective way.

At *The Society Pages*, Sarah Wanenchak looks at *The Line* in great detail in the third part of a three part series looking at war games, war stories, and the various ways war and culture collide. The entire series is well worth a read.

On a more meta level, David Rayfield looks at how the popular conversations around *The Line* perhaps diluted, if not damaged, the game's effect on the second wave of players who came to the game after the first wave raved about it.

This first wave of players were so enthralled by *The Line*, largely, because they were surprised that such a game could possibly come to exist in the current triple-a space, where few publishers are willing to take the slightest risk. The developers spoke to many curious outlets about the process and ideas and motivations that went into the game.

Before the game was even out, journalists were intrigued by the game's promise to channel the themes of *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. At *Kill Screen*, Yannick Lejacq interviews producer Tarl Raney about just what the team were hoping to do with the game, giving one of the first hints that this game was going to be something different. In response to this, Kirk Hamilton at *Kotaku* voices his justified concerns that videogames' fixation with *Apocalypse Now* might just be an excuse for artsy violence.

Russ Pitts at *The Verge* has perhaps the most comprehensive breakdown of the full story behind *The Line*, with interviews with lead writer Walt Williams, lead designer Cory Davis, and narrative designer Richard Pearsey as part of a much longer article.

Richard Pearsey writes an essay himself for *Gamasutra* on *The Line*'s narrative design. Also at *Gamasutra*, Brandon Sheffield interviews Cory Davis about many of the game's themes and design decisions.

At *Giant Bomb*, Patrick Klepek talks to Walt Williams to get some insight into just how 2K allowed the game to be what it is. And, on an incredibly insightful podcast at *Gamespot*, Walt Williams discusses many, many aspects of the game in great depth.

Thank you for reading